

Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnation

I Will Cook With My Fluffy Friends

THE FIGUREHEAD QUEEN IS STRONGEST AT HER OWN PACE~

YU

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Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnating, I Will Cook With My Fluffy
Friends: The Figurehead Queen Is Strongest At Her Own Pace Volume 1

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Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnating, I Will Cook With My Fluffy Friends: The Figurehead Queen Is Strongest At Her Own Pace Volume 1

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illust. KASUMI NAGI







Natalie
West Palace
Queen
Candidate

**Glenreed
Wolfvarte**
Wolfvarte's
Silver Wolf King.

Chapter 1: Awakened and Abandoned

“**LAETITIA**, as of today, our engagement is over.”

With those words, my future came screeching to a halt.

This man—the crown prince, Fritz—left me dumbfounded with his sudden declaration.

“How cold...”

My whole body shivered as I spoke.

But what chilled me to my core wasn’t just the gaze my fiancé Fritz cast down upon me.

Drops of water formed from my wet bangs and fell before my eyes.

I’d been completely soaked in cold water, and my body trembled violently from the drastic change in temperature.

“How cruel... What did I do to deserve being pushed into the fountain...?”

“Are you really going to play dumb? I know all about you harassing Sumia.”

That’s not true. I never meant to cause her harm.

When I raised my head to object, I was met with the sight of Sumia clinging to Fritz.

Sumia was a young girl with soft chestnut hair and round green eyes.

Her charming face was clouded in fear as she looked at me. I could even see her trembling.

“Don’t you see how frightened she is? Have you no sympathy for the poor girl? You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“...I haven’t done anything to be ashamed of,” I asserted.

I was certain I had nothing to apologize for.

When Fritz had informed me that he was ending our engagement, and with Sumia standing there by his side, all I did was approach the two of them to ask what was going on.

But one of Fritz's followers had pushed me back, sending me tumbling into the water.

"Still trying to worm your way out of admitting guilt, are you? The dip in the fountain didn't manage to wake you up?"

"...Wake me...up...?"

The words slipped quietly from my lips.

In a way, I was completely awake now.

My eyes had been opened.

Rattled by the shock of losing my fiancé and being pushed into a fountain, I realized that I'd regained the memories of my past life.



"**JIRO**, are you ready to go on a walk?"

"Arf!!"

When I peeked under the red roof of his doghouse, Jiro, my Shiba Inu, sauntered toward me.

After a quick stretch of his front legs, followed by the back ones, Jiro was ready for his walk.

I couldn't help but smile fondly as I watched him sprawl out in front of me. Then I reached over to grab his harness.

Jiro knew the process by heart. He turned toward me and raised his head up eagerly. I pulled the harness over his head, observing the patches of gray around his muzzle as I did.

They say dogs go gray with age just like humans do.

We adopted Jiro when I was still in high school, and now, after many years, he'd grown into a little old man.

“~~~~♪”

Spring was in the air. It was the perfect weather for a walk.

I hummed a tune to myself as the two of us strode along the countryside roads outside of my parents' home.

Trot. Trot. Trot.

I kept an eye on Jiro's ailing legs as we walked, and my thoughts drifted to the kitchen back at home.

Homemade strawberry ice cream was waiting for me in the freezer, and it would be ready to eat when I finished walking Jiro. The craving for that delicate yet fruity flavor was vivid in my mind, bringing a smile to my face. I couldn't wait to feel those thick chunks of strawberry on my tongue.

I'd left lots of strawberry seeds in the mixture too. The ice cream itself was soft and airy—my favorite treat to whip up when spring arrived each year.

Though it was an annual tradition of mine to make strawberry ice cream, the first time I tried my hand at the recipe, I accidentally misread the amount of water to add. The result wasn't pretty.

When there's too much water in the mixture, the ice cream doesn't crystallize properly in the freezer, and the strawberry flavor comes out much weaker.

But with all those failed attempts under my belt, my strawberry ice cream was finally turning into a tasty treat that even my family enjoyed.

“♪ Straaawberries! Strawberr-iiies! ♪”

I quietly sang a little tune of my own making, strolling along with the rhythm.

My song was pretty terrible, but it didn't matter that day.

A few years had passed since I graduated from university and started at my current job.

My company kept me incredibly busy...in fact, I'd even call it downright exploitative. I could count on one hand the number of times I made it home on time. Naturally, we had to come in on holidays too, and as the end of each quarter approached, we were so busy, I don't know how we even made it out

alive.

But for once, I had an entire Sunday all to myself.

I used the day to finish up some chores I'd been putting off, then got on a train to visit my parents' house, which was less than an hour away.

Seeing their smiling faces, playing with Jiro, and eating delicious ice cream—it had the makings of a perfect day off.

“Jiro, wait.”

The traffic light in front of us was red.

Jiro was quick to obey when he heard my voice.

When we first adopted Jiro as a puppy, I was the one who taught him how to respond to commands.

...I'd always heard that Shiba Inus were stubborn creatures, and Jiro certainly wasn't any different. It took quite a while for him to start listening to me even a little.

“Wait” was the command he struggled with the most. I was only in high school at the time, so it was a real test of patience for me to train him.

Three seconds, then five. Little by little, Jiro learned to “wait” in longer intervals, even though there were plenty of setbacks along the way.

But in the end, it just made me all the prouder when Jiro finally started to listen to me, even outside the house. It felt like he'd finally accepted me as his owner.

“Okay, Jiro. Let's go.”

The light was green now.

We made it halfway across the street, when suddenly...

“Arf arf!!”

“What?!”

With a loud roar, a truck came barreling in our direction, with no regard for the crosswalk or our green light.

This is bad. I have to move. I have to save Jiro.

I yanked his harness as hard as I could, letting out a shriek...

And then I felt the impact.

The world went fuzzy around me.

The next thing I felt was a growing pool of warm liquid soaking my body, and I realized I was sprawled out on top of the concrete.

As my consciousness faded to black, the last thing that “I” made out was the sight of Jiro running toward me.



“JIRO...”

A single tear rolled down my cheek as old memories of “mine” came rushing back.

Jiro didn’t seem very hurt, but did he make it out okay?

Jiro was a clever dog. I wanted to believe that he managed to dodge that speeding truck entirely...

“Jiro? And who is that? Are you actually crying right now? Your tears won’t change my mind.”

“...It’s just water from the fountain.”

Jiro was the one who had moved me to tears. The sting of losing my betrothed may have also been a factor.

But crying wouldn’t change anything now.

I felt the tears start to form in my eyes again, so I tensed my muscles to keep them from spilling over.

Crying in front of Fritz and the others was the greatest shame I’d yet experienced in my seventeen years of life.

I am Lady Laetitia Gramwell, Duke Gramwell’s daughter. This is the name and title I go by in this world.

On that day, I was at the Royal Elltoria Academy, where all young nobles

throughout the kingdom of Elltoria receive an education.

When I'd walked through the front doors, past the water fountain in the entryway, I'd been stopped by Fritz, the crown prince of our kingdom. Out of nowhere, he'd told me that he was breaking off our engagement.

The students around us had fallen into a hush as they took in the shocking scene.

Now, Fritz's followers stared down at me in the fountain, their faces cold with judging looks.

There stood Fritz—the crown prince, and the man who was supposed to be my fiancé.

Sumia, the baron's daughter, was clinging to him.

Ilius, the third son of the prime minister, famed for his intellect, was beside them.

Finally, there was Dustin—son of the royal army commander and a skilled swordsman himself.

These were the future leaders of our kingdom, and each one of them glared at me with raw hostility in their eyes.

I stood up, being careful not to let my guard down around them, and placed both feet on the ground as elegantly as I possibly could, almost as if I were in the presence of the king himself. The shock of losing my fiancé and regaining my past-life memories couldn't rattle me into losing my cool, or letting me be put into an even more embarrassing situation.

Since I was soaked to the bone, I decided to use a spell to dry myself.

"...Hands of red. Cage of fire. Sear my robes until they're drier."

I chanted the spell and felt the air around me turn warm, forcing the water right out of my clothes in the form of steam.

...It was my first time using magic with all these new memories in my head. I was a bit more excited than usual.

In my past life, I always adored stories of wizards and spells.

The drying spell I just used was cast by controlling fire. It was a delicate form of magic that couldn't succeed without an experienced user behind it.

The students around us stared at me in awe, having just witnessed me pull it off so easily with such a short spell.

I was dry now, but there was still one question lingering in my mind.

For some reason, the magical energy coursing through my veins felt more powerful than usual.

Maybe it's because I just regained the memories of my past life?

...I would have to look into it later.

I combed my fingers through my blonde hair, now that it was no longer wet from the fountain, and felt the long locks rustle the skirt of my uniform below.

Standing up straight, I turned to look Fritz in the eye, and I could have sworn I saw him flinch ever so slightly.

"Your Highness, is it true? Do you really mean to end our engagement?"

"Of course I do. A woman as wicked as you has no place as the queen of this kingdom." Fritz scowled at me with disgust as he responded bluntly.

"And why is it that you think I am wicked?"

"Playing dumb, are you? I know all about how cruelly you've been treating Sumia."

"Cruelly? If this is about Sumia's overfamiliarity with Your Highness, all I did was warn her about her behavior."

I had every right to take such actions.

Sumia had made many attempts to cozy up to my fiancé.

It was nothing as simple as a few friendly chats between them—the two would link arms in front of others and even dine together alone at night. This was completely inappropriate conduct from people of their status.

"As a noblewoman of this kingdom, I only behave in the most proper manner. Sumia can't claim to be ignorant of the fact that you had a fiancée."

“I... I did know. But I had no idea my friendship with His Highness would garner such terrible scorn...”

Sumia paled and she shuddered more violently than before.

Tears formed in her eyes. She was curling up like a small animal, surely activating the protective urges of everyone in the vicinity.

“You’ve gone too far, Laetitia! Sumia was raised among common folk! Of course she doesn’t understand the ins and outs of high society!”

“That’s exactly why I warned her whenever her behavior wasn’t acceptable for her class. But she refused to heed my advice and continued making the same mistakes.”

“Don’t you have any sympathy for the girl? She’s been dragged into a whole new world with hardly any time to settle in.”

“I respect the choices Sumia has made. But despite her commoner upbringing, she attends this academy as a baron’s daughter, so she must put in the work to carry herself in a way that befits her position.”

In both this life and the last, I was always taught that decisions come with responsibility.

Sumia’s circumstances were certainly unique, but that couldn’t excuse her every misstep.

...Though she was a baron’s daughter, Sumia was the product of her father’s affair.

From what I’d heard, Sumia had lived alone with her mother as a commoner until her father took her in when she turned thirteen.

In his words, he’d seen a latent potential in his daughter.

“Your Highness, Lady Laetitia’s just jealous of her.”

A boy with dark hair and glasses emerged from behind Fritz.

He was Ilius, the third son of the current prime minister.

“She just made quite the spectacle with that spell of hers...even though it was nothing more than simple Fire Magic.”

...Well, sorry to disappoint.

Despite his remarks, Fire Magic has many practical, convenient uses.

You can dry clothes, warm your body, simmer a pot of soup, grill up a piece of meat to save on fuel for cooking...

...Wait, no, no.

With my newly regained memories of my past life, I was starting to think like a member of the lower class.

I'm a duke's daughter now.

The lenses of Ilius's glasses reflected the light, casting his face in a creepy, sinister glow. I decided to save my speech about the many uses of Fire Magic for another time.

Glasses Creep continued to lay on his indulgent theories.

"...And then there's Sumia, who is one of the very few users of Light Magic in our kingdom. Her powers are so robust, she's referred to as the second coming of the legendary Goddess of Light. Sumia attends this school so that her tremendous powers can be used in the service of the kingdom. Don't you find her aspirations to be noble?"

"I would think it unwise to confuse her motivations with their outcome."

"Oh, but there's been an outcome, all right. She's exposed the ugly heart inside you, unbecoming of your title and class."

"Ugly? You sure sound like you're trying to sow discord between Sumia and myself. I can confidently say that all the warnings I issued were appropriate."

"Well..."

Glasses Creep fell silent.

This boy, Ilius, was a gifted student at the very top of his class.

He seemed to understand he had strayed from the pretense of protecting Sumia.

"Hey, now. You've got a lot to say, Laetitia, but you're just jealous, aren't you? Jealous of Sumia's precious Light Magic, and of the affection she receives from

His Highness!”

Dustin, the redheaded and burly third son of the royal army commander, was next to butt into the conversation.

“I’ve always heard that women are jealous creatures, and I guess that’s true after all. You’ve got quite the nerve, using your title as a shield to bully Sumia. Don’t you have any honor?”

He held out his arms to protect the girl.

“Lord Dustin... You have my thanks...”

“I-It’s nothing at all!!”

His face reddened, and he turned away from her. On the inside, I wanted nothing more than to let out a dramatic sigh.

Et Tu, Dustin?

The famous words of Caesar echoed in my mind.

It appeared that Dustin, now in addition to the crown prince, had completely fallen for Sumia.

Dustin is the third son of a duke.

Between his father, a commander, and his three brothers, Dustin spent his entire life being trained in the ways of the sword.

As a result, he’d grown into a brawny man who lacked any experience with women of his own age.

In fact, it invoked a distant memory from my past life in Japan. I’d seen boys who spent their high school days with nothing but sports and athletics in their brain, only to get to college and start hanging out with nasty, manipulative girls.

“Come on, Laetitia. Don’t you have a response? Or do you finally get it now?”

“I have no intention of conversing with a mannerless man who refuses to address me correctly.”

Both the muscle-head and I belonged to families of equal rank.

He’d always referred to me improperly, but that didn’t make it right.

“Y-You just can’t let anything go, can you?!”

“It’s not only about my form of address. Lord Dustin, I have yet to receive an apology for pushing me into the fountain.”

“I did that because you were getting too close to Sumia, Lae— Lady Laetitia!!”

“I only approached her to talk, and nothing more. Did you see me raise a hand against her? You saw no such thing, and you pushed me down before I could get a word in edgewise.”

“How else could I have protected her?!”

“What are those muscles of yours even for, Lord Dustin? You could have just as easily grabbed me by the shoulders with those bulky arms of yours if you really wanted to stop me.”

“...You seriously want me to apologize to you?! Even after what you’ve done?! I know you pushed Sumia down a staircase! You’re completely shameless!!”

...What the hell is he talking about?

Dustin’s angry accusation was the first I’d heard of this.

“...There’s no truth to that whatsoever. What proof do you have?”

“Sumia said you shoved her from behind...!”

“Is that all? It would be easy enough for her to fake something like th—”

“That’s enough. Shut your mouth at once.”

My heart skipped a beat at hearing Fritz’s icy voice.

The look he was giving me, brimming with disgust and resentment, stung deep inside my chest.

Our parents were the ones who first arranged our engagement when I was twelve years old.

The betrothal was strictly political, but even so, the two of us were to be partners who would spend the rest of our lives together.

I always knew our relationship would never be a passionate love affair, but at the very least, I hoped we could live in mutual respect of each other. For that

reason, I spent years working to become a person who could support the crown prince.

But that aspiration had been shattered to pieces. Fritz was now glaring at me like I was his greatest enemy.

“I’m tired of this act, Laetitia. Always keeping a straight face as you manage to find the perfect words...even when you were mocking me behind my back all along.”

His face twisted into a pained smile.

“Your Highness, I’ve never done such a thing. As you are my fiancé, I’ve always cared deeply for y—”

“Enough. You never had any feelings for me. Your one and only goal was the future title of ‘queen,’ wasn’t it?”

...Why are you stating the obvious as if it’s a betrayal?

Our engagement was a political arrangement and was never born out of love. And yet, I still believed we could forge that connection together someday.

I’d worked so hard for a goal that Fritz didn’t seem to have the slightest notion of.

“All your studying was to secure your place as the crown princess. I know you’ve been mocking me behind my back because I can’t keep up with you.”

“You’re wrong. I’ve never once looked down on you.” I immediately objected, though, on the inside, I felt a brief tug of doubt.

To be entirely honest, Fritz was not exactly a shining example of a prince. He possessed no notable talents, nor did he make up for it with his work ethic.

He was lacking when it came to studies, magic skills, swordsmanship, and even his ability to command people. I knew he harbored fears about his future reign as the next king, and for that reason, in particular, I would have expected a more mature attitude from Fritz.

...Which is why I tried so hard to be a woman who could make up for his flaws. It might even be more accurate to say that I was so busy trying to better myself as the future queen that I never even had the time to “look down on”

my fiancé.

Even though it was wrong to say I had disrespected him, a rift had clearly grown between Fritz and me as I dedicated myself to my studies. Once his inferiority complex reached critical mass, there was no way to talk him back down.

“All you have are your words, Laetitia. You’re just like all the gossips throughout the royal court—an empty shell of a person hiding behind a respectable name. ...But Sumia is someone who actually cares for me. Even though I made fun of her commoner upbringing at first, she’s still always shown me nothing but genuine kindness.”

“Your Highness...I also care about you...from the bottom of my heart...”

Sumia drew closer to Fritz, her expression a mix between bashfulness and joy.

The heroine’s humble origins soothe the weary prince, who’s so weighed down by all his responsibilities, and thus, he falls in love with her.

...I saw this trope all the time in my past life. It was a regular feature in romantic fiction.

But that left me to fill the role of the villainess, who existed only to come between the two lovers.

“I’ve decided to take Sumia as my wife. Laetitia, you’ve committed a grave crime by bullying the future crown princess, and shall therefore be expelled from the kingdom immediately as punishment.”

The echo of Fritz’s declaration was the only sound throughout the hall.

...Me? Expelled from the kingdom for a crime? Have you lost your marbles or something?

...I was so stunned, even my thoughts were turning silly.

By that point, I was starting to accept that our engagement was truly over, but I never expected it to go so far.

I was from a ducal family that figured centrally in the political system.

To drive me out of the kingdom over a perceived slight was an act of tyranny

from the crown prince.

...I can't stop him from ending our engagement, but where does he expect me to go?!

This wasn't like banishing a commoner.

There was a procedure that needed to be followed for the process of exiling a noblewoman, or so I believed...

Knowing Fritz, he probably hadn't thought ahead at all.

Glasses Creep, a.k.a. Ilius, looked just as panicked as I felt. He was fiddling with his glasses, and it gave me the distinct feeling that my hunch was right.

Ilius has a disagreeable personality, but he's far from stupid. The two of us were always battling for the top grades at our academy.

Though our rivalry was fierce, the two of us eventually...well, no, we never really bonded over it, but we had a repertoire of our own as rivals.

"Oh, Cantaloupe Head, come translate this ancient text for me."

"Glasses Creep, could you lend me your textbook?"

The two of us could cast off all pretenses and engage in an amicable war of words.

Unlike Fritz, Ilius was not the kind of person who would make an ally out of a girl who had nothing to offer him, like with Sumia.

If he was helping her, his motivation had to be his own self-interest.

I did know that Sumia's and Ilius's families were distantly related.

On the other hand, my family had a strained relationship with Ilius's.

It was clear he intended to steal the title of crown princess away from me by pushing Sumia and Fritz together.

...I'd been aware of his schemes for some time, but now it seemed he'd actually managed to best me.

However, I doubted even Ilius predicted how his efforts would be rewarded. His family's plan was probably centered around destroying my engagement in a

much less severe manner.

In the end, Fritz's decision came in the worst conceivable way.

I knew for a while that Fritz and I were growing apart, and yet, for things to conclude this idiotically was still unthinkable to me.

In front of the world, the crown prince had declared our engagement over and that I was to be expelled from the kingdom.

It was a foolish declaration of war against the Gramwell family and me.

The Gramwells are an esteemed family. We possess a great amount of land and wealth.

If people of our means believed His Majesty had agreed to banish their daughter...it could break apart the very unity of our kingdom. Ilius had surely reached the same conclusion—he was shooting me nervous glances, as if pleading for my help.

...Don't give me that pathetic look, Glasses Creep.

The boy, usually filled with an irritating amount of self-confidence, had completely transformed...

Sure, you didn't expect Fritz to be so stupid, but this is all thanks to your plan!

I wanted to scream that this was his fault...but unfortunately, I appeared to be the only one who could fix this whole mess.

I was out of options. All I could do was grit my teeth and accept this fate for the good of the kingdom as a whole.

"...I understand your concerns, Your Highness... But I must ask, does His Majesty know I'm to be banished?"

"I'll inform Father once it's done."

As I suspected, Fritz's decision appeared to be the result of his own shortsightedness.

...Despite the foolishness of this crown prince, he was the only male heir born to the king and queen.

If Fritz became unable to succeed the throne, the next in line would be the

king's younger brother, who was known to be a wise man.

But this brother was not in good favor with the king, so His Majesty would never think of letting him inherit the crown. Fritz was to remain the crown prince under any circumstances.

At the same time, His Highness should know well enough that he had no right to do something as foolish as to expel me from our kingdom on his own. It would become a political headache for the king if his son were to force this any further.

"...Very well. Since you've come to despise me, I'll respect those feelings and leave the kingdom for some time."

His hatred was the crux of this whole situation.

Of course, he possessed no real evidence that I had ever bullied Sumia.

It was his emotions, or more accurately, his selfishness, that forced my hand. The best thing I could do was curry favor with His Majesty and avoid causing any trouble for my family.

With nothing left to say, I decided there was no reason to be humiliated any further.

I turned and made my way back to the school entrance as hushed cries of pity surrounded me from all sides.

"She's the woman rejected by the crown prince."

"That poor duke's daughter, banished from her glorious homeland."

Their voices buzzed against my eardrums, burrowing their way inside my head.

Since our kingdom had survived through era after era, many nobles looked down on our neighboring countries for their lack of history.

They all judged banishment to be as grave a punishment as death.

Thanks to the memories of my past life, though, I didn't find it to be such a horrifying prospect...

Even so, on that day, I lost both my fiancé and my home in one fell swoop.



“**GOOD** afternoon, my lady. You’re later than I expected you today. Was everything all right at school?”

My carriage was parked a short walk away from the school gates.

A man with neatly styled black hair stood in front of the carriage, awaiting my arrival.

This man was none other than Lucian, my head servant.



He stood tall over me, with a handsome face that displayed both his attentiveness and poise.

Anyone's first impression of Lucian would be that he looks like a capable butler, but that position wasn't yet his due to his young age of only twenty-two. His talents were all but guaranteed to carry him to the role in the future.

"...I found myself in quite the predicament today. We can discuss it in the carriage."

I took Lucian's outstretched hand and stepped up into the passenger car.

We were the very picture of a distinguished young lady and her doting servant.

I'm sure I would have been a combination of bewildered and elated to be in such a situation in my past life. But to Laetitia, the current "me," it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

My customs as a noblewoman appeared to now coexist with that middle-class lifestyle I experienced in the past.

I sighed and leaned against the soft seat. Lucian took his place across from me. With that, the carriage began to creak forward at the beckoning of the driver.

Putting my thoughts in order, I managed to convey the day's events to Lucian.

"Today, His Highness informed me that our engagement is over."

"...Come again?"

Lucian's blue eyes went wide. He stared at me intensely.

"What does that mean, exactly? Surely, it must be some kind of joke..."

"Sadly, it's all too true. He announced it to the whole world, right there in the entry hall. I've also been told I'm to be expelled from the kingdom."

The more I explained, the sharper Lucian's gaze grew.

"...What an absolute fool, that prince. A thousand deaths wouldn't be enough to atone for casting shame upon my lady."

He didn't hesitate to hurl insults toward Fritz, the crown prince of our kingdom.

"That empty-headed, spoiled little brat...", he cursed.

His tongue was sharp for a servant.

...Well, I guess I was just calling Fritz "the foolish prince" in my head earlier, so I suppose I can't judge him...

...But my innermost thoughts could be ignored for the time being.

Lucian usually carried himself in a dignified manner, like someone born to an upper-class family, despite being a commoner himself.

Throughout all the years of his service, I'd only heard him resort to commoner speech a handful of times...or perhaps a bit more.

"I knew that dunce would screw everything up at some point... Do you have any intention of accepting that ridiculous demand? Expulsion from the kingdom?"

"Yes, and I'll be going peacefully. I can't let this land be divided by a rift between the royal family and my own."

This was the responsibility that came with my title in this world.

Our kingdom wasn't nearly as peaceful or prosperous as the Japan I once knew. The fact that I could live my life without hardship was thanks to my noble status.

"...A noble must be ready to give up everything for the sake of the people."

It was my father who'd repeated those words to me many times over the course of my life in this world.

Father was a man with a dauntingly terrifying face. Sadly, this made people overlook his traits as an admirable person with a strong sense of duty.

"...I don't know where I'll go when I leave. I could be sent to a distant empire or to a dreadful land somewhere. If that happens, I want you to stay here without me, Lucian."

"My lady, you couldn't get rid of me if you were sent to the ends of the

earth.”

So that was a no.

“Because you’re the one who saved me from that orphanage after I lost my parents.”

“Lucian...”

That was seven years ago. I was ten years old at the time.

When Father told me to select a few servants of my own, it proved to be more challenging than I anticipated. But one day, when I was visiting an orphanage as part of my philanthropic work, I met the then fifteen-year-old Lucian.

Despite never receiving a real education, the boy had taught himself to read and write all on his own. He even assisted in the operation of the orphanage with those skills.

Moved by his story, I begged my father to let me employ him as my personal servant. He was hesitant at first but eventually agreed to a year-long trial run to evaluate Lucian’s performance.

By the time that year was up, Lucian had become an impeccable servant, both in etiquette and job skills. Even Father came to approve of him.

...Everything worked out in the end, but it was a bold request of me to make.

As a duke’s daughter, I wasn’t supposed to associate too closely with commoners. I’d only just regained the memories of my past life, but it was possible those experiences and the values I held then still influenced me in this life, even before today.

“Thank you, Lucian, but there’s no need to be so loyal to me. I only employed you because I wanted a skilled servant for my own devices.”

“Yes, I know. I’m aware of your reasons...and how you were truly worried for me above all else—not to mention your noble, dignified aspirations to put your kingdom above your own desires... I know these facts better than anyone.”

Lucian placed his hand on his chest and bowed.

My heart was filled with warmth and contentment to hear his declaration of loyalty. It was also just a little bit embarrassing.

...It really was a terrible day.

I had my engagement annulled, I was pushed into a fountain, my former fiancé had all sorts of choice words for me, and a brute of a man tried to threaten me...

There was so much hostility and hatred, with one blow landing on me after another.

But despite it all, Lucian's unwavering support broke through my shell and warmed my heart. I felt like I could finally stop and take a breath.

"I must have terrific luck to be blessed with a loyal servant like you."

"Thank you, my lady. I will strive to be worthy of such praise."

Through the courtesy and respect for me in his smile, I could also make out Lucian's deep affection for me. I returned his smile. Feeling a little less glum, we carried on with more peaceful topics of conversation. It was a quiet way to pass the time. Eventually, we felt the moving carriage slow to a halt.

We had arrived in the eastern region of the capital city, where my family resided.

The grand mansion came into view through my window. With it, I felt my mood start to sink again.

"Don't be so upset, my lady. Please remember that you'll always have me on your side."

Lucian knew just what to say to me.

I didn't think my change of mood was visible on the outside, but as my servant of many years, perhaps he was just that good at seeing through me.

"I'm sure the idea of telling your father, the duke, about the end of your engagement is daunting... But knowing Duke Gramwell, I can't imagine he'd blame you for something that wasn't even your fault, my lady."

"...I think you're right about that."

With a hesitant smile, I turned my gaze away from Lucian.

The more I imagined Father's disappointment when I told him about the day's events, the more my mood worsened.

...But that wasn't even my most pressing concern at the moment. Though it was over something that would seem trivial to many, something was weighing heavy on my mind now that I had my past-life memories again.

I stepped out of the carriage. The sun was already creeping lower in the sky above me.

My dreaded dinner was drawing near.



I went to my room and changed into one of my dresses.

After some time, a knock came at my door, and one of the maids informed me that dinner was ready.

I gave her my usual, distinguished noblewoman's smile.

But on the inside, I was filled with dread as I followed the maid to the dining room.

...Solemn background music was playing in my mind.

I made my way down the vast halls of my mansion, letting the song continue to play out until we arrived at our destination.

The maid pulled out my chair at the grand dining table. It could easily seat ten people. I lowered myself into the chair, and it was then that the kitchen door opened.

"...!"

An intense smell stung my nose.

It was coming from my dinner, or more specifically, from the extreme amount of spice in my dinner. The food wasn't even in front of me yet, and the scent was already overwhelming.

...Yep, this is a bad one, folks.

I was resorting to mental commentary to distract myself from reality. More and more dishes of food were being brought into the dining room all the while.

In our kingdom, it was customary to serve every part of a meal, from the main course down to the soups, all at once on the same table.

The potent smell was inescapable. Hesitantly, I reached over and took my fork.

First, I tried the appetizer. It was a salad made from local vegetables harvested just outside the capital city. However...

The problem was the thick layer of glistening dressing on top of said salad.

It oozed over the greens, reminding me a little of the gravy I used to eat in my past life, but only in appearance.

At first bite, the difference was evident. My tongue was bombarded with an intensely spicy, acidic flavor.

The sauce was so strong, I couldn't even taste the freshness of the vegetables underneath.

To be honest, not one part of this salad appealed to my palate, but I kept my cool and forced each bite down anyway. My training as a noblewoman, as well as my past-life experience as a corporate drone, was being put to the test—determining how much control I could wield over my facial expressions.

To my further disappointment, I spotted the same sauce from the salad covering the meat that was to be my main course. Naturally, the ingredients had been altered to reflect the different dishes underneath...

But once again, the seasoning was so strong that I could barely tell what I was eating. My meal didn't feel like meat—it felt like a clump of spices that slightly resembled the texture of meat.

Back in Japan, this probably would have been the highest grade of meat you could buy. However, that quality was completely lost in tonight's dinner. It was an utterly disappointing meal.

...Not that it was inedible or anything so extreme.

From the meat to the vegetables, and even the spices, too, any ingredients on

a duke's table would be the absolute best the kingdom has to offer.

...Yet, it still didn't actually taste good. Both my heart and stomach were left unsatisfied.

The dinner was a complete waste of spices that never needed to be used so abundantly in the first place.

The words *too much of a good thing* seemed fitting.

There *was* an actual reason for the excessive spices used in every dish. Forty years ago, our kingdom of Elltoria discovered a brand-new sea route that stretched all the way to a southern continent.

When travelers returned home with ships full of these new kinds of seasonings, the people of our kingdom took to them immediately.

Compared with Japan, this world doesn't have much diversity when it comes to its cuisine, nor have we managed to selectively breed many vegetables for consumption. That's why spices are used in such high quantities to compensate for the flavor and make the foods easier to preserve.

With the people hooked on these new seasonings, noblemen and noblewomen began to build up their own stocks, and soon, an abundant use of spices became a show of one's status. This display of fortune turned into a fierce competition of its own.

As a result, I was now staring at a table full of dishes that tasted only of spices.

Of course, commoners and less-wealthy noble families didn't eat such rich meals, but I was a duke's daughter, after all.

Just about every dish I ate at this table was completely overseasoned.

It was all the more painful now that I had the memories of my past life, where my hobbies were cooking and eating out at various restaurants.

...In this world, the average person's palate isn't that different from what it was on Earth.

I still remembered some of the food I ate in town all those years ago. They were simple yet tasty meals.

Additionally, present-day nobles tend to drink wine that's light and crisp with dinner. We often drink lemon water at the table as well.

...Though, to me, both drinks just feel like a way of getting much-needed relief from those extremely rich meals.

This overseasoned food only served to benefit the reputations of the upper classes. My theory was that it all came from underdeveloped methods of cooking and a culture that didn't value the raw flavor of the ingredients as something worth relying on.

"Spices are delicious."

Thus, if you use lots of those spices, it will only make your cooking taste better.

...That logic brought about the use of even more spices in food, little by little, until everyone's taste buds were completely numbed.

It wasn't only Elltoria that was seeing such a trend. To different extents, our entire western continent was going to seasoning extremes in their cooking. I could hardly think of any countries that didn't share this culture among its highest ranks.

One exception that came to mind was a neighboring nation, the kingdom of Raiolbern.

Their borders housed vast stretches of farmland, and because the population thought highly of their locally grown food, their aristocrats ate meals that used a moderate amount of seasoning. I was very jealous of it.

There was more I envied than just their cuisine. Two years ago, the Raiolbern Kingdom experienced a political shake-up, and the new crown prince was said to be an incredibly capable man. As a result, the land had started to earn itself a great reputation for the improvements to public safety.

Light meals, a talented prince, and a peaceful life for its citizens.

After having my mouth accosted by all those spices and being cast out of my home because of Fritz's idiocy, *jealous* was practically an understatement.

...If I have to leave, then I hope I get to live in Raiolbern or some other land

with delicious food.

Keeping a blank face, I continued to chew my overseasoned dinner, now with the most earnest of desires in mind.



FATHER asked to speak with me once I was finished with dinner.

Gardocia Gramwell, the head of the Gramwell family.

My father bears a regal-looking mustache and gives off a powerful, dignified aura...perhaps to a fault.

He has the kind of face that's terrifying enough to make even children cry. Many people feel pressure and uneasiness just by looking at him.

"You're telling me that your seat as the future queen was stolen by a baron's daughter?"

He furrowed his brow as he stared at me. His voice was deep and cold.

"...That's correct. I'm very sorry I ruined the engagement you arranged for me, Father."

I bowed my head. Regret pricked at the inside of my chest.

The reason I worked so hard to be a good fiancée for Fritz was originally for my father's sake. As his daughter, I dreaded the thought of casting shame upon him, so I studied hard to become a wonderful crown princess who had both intelligence and poise to boast of.

"Don't apologize, Laetitia. You're still a duke's daughter, so stand up tall and proud."

"...Yes, Father."

"Since there's no escaping your punishment now, I'll work to find a suitable country for you to live in. It will probably keep me all the busier, so we might not have much time to speak in the coming days."

"I'm ashamed to have caused you so much trouble..."

I meant every word of it too...

...when I looked at Father's face.

His usually piercing eyes were now bloodshot, with dark black circles underneath. It only made his face ghastlier in appearance—he was discernibly exhausted.

It reminded me of the days I spent as a corporate drone, surrounded by my pale-faced coworkers. I recognized that look completely.

“Of course I'm going to get the best care for you. You're my daughter; I won't let any harm befall you. ...Now that you've fallen out with Prince Fritz, I think you know better than to show your face at that school anymore, yes? I want you to wait here at home until I find a place for you to go.”

“I understand. I'll do as you wish.”

I nodded and watched a bit of relief form on Father's face.

His gaze was still as piercing as ever, but as his daughter, I could tell the slightest changes in his expression.

“If you're not going to be the crown princess, you have no need to study for that role anymore. I know how hard you've been working on your education, staying up late for so many nights... Tell me now if there's anything you need. If you want something to occupy yourself here at home, I can send away for it.”

“Something to occupy myself...?”

I thought about it for a bit.

My request might be struck down immediately, but I decided to ask it anyway.

“Would you allow me access to the kitchen?”

“The kitchen? What for?”

“I'd like to try my hand at cooking. I know it's not proper for a noblewoman, but...what do you say, Father?”

Women of high status in my kingdom are not supposed to occupy their kitchens.

Some ladies prepare small desserts for teatime, but other than that, almost

no one cooks actual meals.

I didn't have much hope, but I decided to ask Father's permission anyway.

"All right. I'll allow it."

"Huh?"

The response slipped out of my mouth involuntarily. His words were just so sudden.

"Father? You really mean it?"

"What's the matter? I thought you were serious. Were you joking?"

"...No, I was serious. I've been wanting to take up cooking, so I'm quite pleased."

"Is that so...? I'm glad you're pleased, but be sure not to let anyone from outside see you in the kitchen. And don't do anything stupid when you're using fire or knives. I hope it's something to entertain you while you're here at home, but don't neglect your safety either."

He gave his warnings in a clear, deep voice. I felt my heart swell with gratitude.

Despite his harsh words, he was only looking out for me.

It couldn't be seen on the surface, but deep down, Father was an awkward yet kindhearted man.

"Thank you, Father. If I prove to be a good cook, will you join me for a meal?"

"...Of course. I'm looking forward to it."

He nodded. It was our promise.

With that, I returned to my room.

Closing the door behind me, I made sure no one else was around before collapsing onto my bed.

"Ugh... I'm exhausted..."

My engagement was over, I was expelled from the kingdom, and I regained the memories of my past life.

...There was a past-life “me” and a present “me.”

Our personalities were polar opposites, but neither one felt completely foreign.

I didn’t have any of these memories until today, and yet, I didn’t feel as if they’d had much influence on my character either way.

“I guess I’ve been on edge quite a lot lately...”

The burdens of being a duke’s daughter and the future crown princess—I was never free of them for a single moment.

Whatever happened next, I decided I wanted to live a freer life where I could pursue the things I wanted.

“...But for now...I should...get to sleep...”

So many things had happened to me that day.

But tomorrow, at least, would be my day to cook up something delicious.

With that last thought, I gently shut my eyes.

Chapter 2: A Craving for Ice Cream

THE next day, I stood at the kitchen counter, wearing an apron dress borrowed from one of the maids. My blonde hair was tied back.

It was a little past noon. My staff had finished cleaning up after lunch, and it wasn't time to get started on dinner yet either, meaning the kitchen was open for my use.

The ingredients and utensils I would need were laid out on the counter in front of me.

Eggs. Cream. Sugar. A bottle of honey.

Metal bowls, cups, a large pot, trays, and a wooden spatula.

Finally, there was a pile of scrap iron that my servants had gathered for me.

...It looked quite out of place, but the metal had an important purpose.

Taking a fistful of the iron, I set it in front of me, closed my eyes, and began to focus on the inside of my body.

I shifted that concentration to my hands, and then to my legs, followed by my chest, stomach, and head. Once I felt the magic swirling throughout my whole body, I concentrated on that energy.

This was Earth Magic. I recited my spell in its entirety, careful not to omit anything until the ritual was complete.

"That should do it..."

The magic exited me and made its way to the countertop.

The scraps of iron disappeared, and in their place now rested a shiny metal whisk.

This is called "transmutation," a form of Earth Magic.

It's used to reshape dirt or minerals into another form desired by the caster.

The spell appears handy at first, but few sorcerers actually practice transmutation due to a couple of reasons.

First, it requires a large amount of magical energy to cast. Even transforming a handful or two of scrap metal is a mid-tier spell in terms of energy use.

The second and most problematic reason is that transmuted items lack any real durability. In fact, most items start to fall apart after only an hour or so. Practicality is a big obstacle with transmutation.

...Fortunately, that wouldn't be a problem for the amount of time I needed with my whisk.

If it fell apart, I knew I could just build it again from scratch.

I picked up the whisk and felt its cold weight against my hand.

"Hmm. It's a bit heavy. And the head might be too small?"

I had been trying to create something like the stainless-steel whisks I always used when I lived in Japan. With many years of experience under my belt, I really believed I could make it perfectly on my first try.

But seeing the tiny flaws in my beloved whisk just bothered me all the more.

"I guess I'm starting over."

A heavy whisk would quickly tire out my hand, so I decided to try again from square one.

Using magic on an already-transmuted item would be difficult, so I turned my attention to the unused pile of iron instead. After four or so more attempts, the whisk finally looked and felt just how it was supposed to.

"There we are."

I gripped the whisk's handle. A smile formed on my face at the feeling of the familiar weight. With a perfect replica of my favorite whisk, I was positive the rest of the work would be smooth sailing.

Today's menu was ice cream.

It was the first food that sprang to mind when I considered the things I most wanted to eat.

I passed on from that previous life before I had a chance to taste my homemade ice cream, so the craving still lingered.

If only I could make strawberry ice cream. That would be perfect.

As far as I could tell, real strawberries didn't exist in my kingdom. Fortunately, we at least had various berries that were similar in taste, but I decided I would keep up my search for the real deal until I'd found them.

But that was a problem for another time. I washed my whisk, dried it off, and began the process of making ice cream.

My first step was to measure out each ingredient into metal cups and bowls.

Then I separated the egg whites from the yolks into two more bowls.

I added sugar to the egg whites and whisked, whisked, whisked, and whisked some more...

...It got tiring fast.

And that was still from using the whisk. I don't think I would have been strong enough to do the same job with a wooden spatula.

When I lived in Japan, I tried various techniques like chilling the egg whites in the fridge in advance, hoping it would save me some time. But now, I just wanted to play it by the book, or else I could easily mess something up.

I continued to whisk the whites until they formed peaks.

Next, I added more sugar to the bowl of cream and the bowl of egg yolks, mixing them well.

I then mixed the three bowls together, and finally, I stirred in the honey with my spatula.

Once I was sure the mixture was properly blended, I poured the bowl's contents into three smaller vats.

Now it was time for more magic.

I picked up a large, flat-bottom pot and used a Water Magic spell to cover the inside with ice.

After carefully sprinkling salt onto the ice, I set the vats inside the pot.

I'd used this "refrigerant" technique in a science class experiment long ago.

The salt would keep the environment much colder than ice could on its own.

...But unfortunately, I didn't really remember the correct ratio of salt to use, so I couldn't just lock the ice cream away out of sight.

There was a box I could use to store my vats, but it wasn't as insulated as I needed, and for that reason, I had to separate the mixture into three different pots and keep them in the icebox with different amounts of salt each time.

I added even more salt and ice a few times along the way, feeling the amount of magical energy I still had in my body each time.

"It's not like before. I still feel great..."

Fire Magic is my specialty.

Normally, it takes a lot of my energy to use Water Magic, since it's fire's opposing element.

But for some reason, today, I wasn't exhausting myself even after making large amounts of ice.

Even before that, my many attempts at creating a whisk didn't seem to have drained me either.

I'd felt it ever since yesterday—my magic was flowing better than ever.

I was using the energy in my body efficiently and minimizing its loss. It was a remarkable improvement.

...I bet it's because I remember my past life now.

Naturally, magic didn't exist on the Earth I knew.

The "me" from that life was now sensing the foreign presence of magical energy inside her body, and even as Laetitia, I felt it more keenly than ever.

It was like an invisible web of blood vessels spiraling throughout my body, and I was probably the only one in this world who experienced that sensation.

Everyone in this world was born with magical energy to some extent. It was a natural part of the body, no different from flesh or blood. Though, the fact that my magic now felt unfamiliar in my own body was troubling to me.

Even years of studying under master sorcerers never made me so hyperaware of my own energy. The change in my body was a dramatic one, and it came about from regaining the memories of my past life.

If I had been using only 10 percent of my body's magic at best before this, now that I had my past-life memories, I was somewhere around 60 percent use.

This was even more extraordinary when I considered that master sorcerers used less than 30 percent of their magical energy—an amount I had more than doubled for myself.

Even before this, my Gramwell blood held more magical energy than almost anyone in the kingdom. I was practically cheating at this point. If Sumia, the girl known as the Goddess, was to challenge me with her Light Magic, I could almost certainly overpower her spells with a single blow.

...Not that I had any real intention of using an attack spell on anyone.

An attack spell is designed to be used on someone else, after all.

I'd had practice battles with my older brothers, but I didn't actually want to fight anyone in real life.

Dangerous situations like that were best avoided. I only needed the magic I used in my daily life—and in my cooking, of course.

Anything showier than that wasn't safe and could leave people suspicious of me too.

Two hours passed as I kept my head busy thinking about these things.

"It's done...!"

The smooth, frozen ice cream in two of the vats was now glimmering in the light.

One tray looked particularly messy, probably because I used the least amount of salt and it didn't get cold enough, but the other two trays appeared to be successes.

The tray I used the most salt on was now holding perfectly smooth ice cream. I'd taken it out of the box many times, stirring it with a spoon to get some air into the mixture along the way. Now I knew that using a lot of salt was the best

way to get the ice cream frozen.

I grinned at my finished vats. The kitchen staff came over, looking at my creation with curiosity.

“You’ve arrived at the perfect time, everyone. Would you each like to try some of this ice cream with me?”

“Say, what is that stuff? Frozen candy or something of the sort? If it’s too expensive, maybe it’s not something we should be eating.”

“There’s no need to worry about that. The ingredients aren’t that expensive, and I planned on sharing it with the kitchen staff in the first place.”

“Really? You did?”

“I thought that warm places make the best setting for a cold treat.”

I enjoyed eating ice cream during the winter too, but I usually had it in the spring and summer.

However, spring was only just arriving in Elltoria.

Despite my craving for ice cream, the cold air of the season was inescapable...

Except inside this kitchen.

It was almost time for the workers to begin preparing dinner, so they’d already lit a number of stoves throughout the kitchen. Slowly but surely, the temperature had risen in the room.

The conditions could hardly be more perfect for ice cream.

“Goodness...!”

The head chef took his first bite and froze in shock.

“It’s cold and soft, yet with such a delicate, sweet taste... This is wonderful!”

He stared at the ice cream bowl, spoon still in hand.

I could tell from the intensity of his look that he wasn’t just being polite.

For further proof, I watched him take two more spoonfuls of the ice cream, nodding his head vigorously with each bite.

He likes it. That’s a relief.

I felt a smile spread across my face, then watched as the other cooks in the gallery raised their eyebrows in surprise. It was true that I'd been extremely focused lately, even around the house. Perhaps my smile was an unusual sight.

I felt a bit bad about startling them, but I couldn't help it.

Having my cooking praised lifted my spirits.

Being able to share tasty food with others was a blessing, and all the more so when it was something I made with my own two hands.

With a spring in my step, I scooped up a bite of ice cream from the tray and brought it to my mouth.

The cold treat was a pleasant contrast to the warm, humid room.

"My lady, this is delicious. The more it melts, the more you can taste the sweet, mild flavor of honey."

Lucian also seemed pleased with the results.

The ice cream was light in both flavor and texture. I felt like I could practically eat the rest of it all by myself.

I had been nervous about the whole endeavor, what with the lack of stoves and refrigerators like I was used to on Earth, but the project turned out to be a success. I might even be able to combine my own craftiness and magic to create all kinds of other dishes.

Cheesecake. Cookies. Salisbury steak. Cream soup.

The list of foods I craved filled my head. I pondered each meal while savoring the sweet taste of ice cream on my tongue.

After finishing my own serving, I cast a glance at the kitchen workers.

Some of them seemed a bit uncomfortable as they attempted to take bites of the ice cream. They'd never had it before, so it was a novel experience.

It was also my first attempt at making it since my reincarnation, so it wasn't perfect. The ice cream still had a few spots that were uneven in consistency. Some of the workers seemed to have found the areas that had frozen completely solid.

“If it’s too firm, please pour a little extra honey on top.”

I took out the honey, which I’d kept slightly warmer than room temperature.

There was honey already mixed into the ice cream itself, but I saved enough for us to use as an extra topping if we wanted it. I also wasn’t sure if the honey flavor would be very strong in the finished product, so I wanted a back-up option just in case.

Fine dining in my kingdom generally consists of extremely savory dishes that are doused in spices.

I knew that for our staff, who always prepared such foods for our family, it was possible they might not take to sweet, cold treats.

Hesitantly, the cooks approached the jar of honey and drizzled it over their bowls like I suggested.

The warm honey, golden and glittering, seeped into the surface of the ice cream.

The chefs looked nervous as they took their next bites.

“It’s so smooth...!!”

Satisfied, they quickly plunged their spoons back in, over and over again.

A warm topping on a cold dessert. Faint traces of honey in each scoop of ice cream, with another rich layer of it on top.

It was a clever, tasty combination of flavors and textures.

“Thank you for the treat, my lady. That ‘ice cream’ of yours was delicious.”

The head chef conveyed the thanks of the staff for letting them share my creation.

“I’ve never had any food with that kind of texture before...and it was a bit of a shock at first, if I’m being honest. I’ve had frozen ice sweets, but never ones made with frozen cream. Where did you learn this recipe?”

“It was from a rare cookbook from another kingdom... I read it as part of my education to become the crown princess, for my future dealings with foreign lands.”

I felt bad about lying, but I couldn't exactly respond with "I made it in a past life!"

The kitchen staff looked surprised but convinced by my explanation.

"I see. Well, that's very impressive! I wouldn't have guessed the crown princess would need to study such things..."

They all seemed to agree. The expressions on their faces, however, looked somewhat sympathetic.

I was already the "former" crown princess.

Guilt crept into me for saddening them. At the same time, I watched the lie about the "incredible crown princess education" I received as it started to spread among all the staff.

"My lady, as for the vat of ice cream that didn't freeze very well, do you think we could eat it if we try freezing it again?"

"Could it perhaps be made into a sauce of some kind instead?" I suggested.

Melting the ice cream down to refreeze it wouldn't have any effect on the crystallization.

Since we couldn't regain that light and fluffy texture, I had another idea of my own.

"A sauce?"

"That's right. It's a bit sweet, but I think it would go well with a meat dish of some kind. I'd like it if you could refrain from using too many other seasonings, and that way, you can savor the taste of the ice cream on its own."

"Yes, that sounds like it could come out nicely..."

The head chef's face looked a little gloomy.

"My lady, can I ask if you've grown bored of the savory meals we make for you?"

He was visibly nervous.

Perhaps, as a chef, he'd begun to grow suspicious of the quality of those overseasoned meals he always made for the nobles, while continuing to follow

his orders at the same time.

That was probably why he looked so uneasy in his response.

“It’s nothing like that. I suppose I’d just like to try something new every now and then.”

Truthfully, the chef wasn’t wrong at all, but there was a reason I couldn’t admit it.

I’d spent my whole life eating rich, spice-filled foods without complaint. It would be odd if I suddenly started rejecting them now. A demand like that could even end up getting the kitchen staff fired.

Most chefs in my kingdom were commoners in rank. They could not disobey nobles. As a duke’s daughter, if I told the head chef that his food wasn’t satisfactory, it would cast a lot of pressure onto the poor man.

It wouldn’t be long before I left this house for foreign lands.

I decided to keep my nose out of the kitchen staff’s business when it came to the daily menus, since it could spell trouble for them after I was gone. I would stick to making small treats whenever I took to the kitchen.

Hmm.

Still, I really wished it didn’t have to be such a hassle. I was getting impatient.

When I made it to my new home, I needed to be sure that better cooking opportunities would be available.

Unsure of where the future would take me, I sat down with the head chef to discuss how he could use my leftover ice cream.



I spent the next few days completing everything I needed to formalize the end of my engagement. In my spare time, I was able to use the kitchen for a bit of cooking too.

Despite my leisurely pace, I knew that Father was hard at work for my sake, and that fact filled me with guilt.

Father was already a busy man, but now I’d dragged him into this mess with

Fritz on top of that. He'd become busier than I'd ever seen him before.

My mind was occupied with concern for Father's health, when Lucian appeared, carrying documents in his hands.

I flipped through the report as quickly as I could. When I finished, Lucian spoke.

"I've read the results of the investigation, and it appears you were right, my lady... If this report had been finished before your engagement was annulled... would things have turned out better for you?"

"...I can't say for certain, but I don't think it would have made a difference."

I was grateful the report provided answers to my questions, but still, it didn't really matter in the end.

I was pretty sure my engagement would already be over by this point, regardless of when the report came out. I was explaining my reasoning to Lucian when a soft knock came from the door.

"Come in. What is it?"

"There's a letter for you, my lady. It's from..."

My eyes met with the name of the crown prince on the envelope.

The maid told me she'd found it unexpectedly in the pile of mail addressed to our house.

I read the letter. Inside was a request to meet with me privately that night so that Fritz could apologize for his actions.



***"WHEN** I informed my father of my actions, he gave me a stern lecture, and I came to realize how cruelly I treated you. I know it may be too late, but I'd like to offer you an apology and discuss where to go from here. Would I be able to see you tonight? There's a place I'd like to meet, away from the eyes of all the gossiping nobles. Please bring no more than one or two servants with you, so as not to stand out."*

The letter had instructed me to meet Fritz at the old ruins in the capital city's

western district.

It was a quiet place—large pillars still stood tall, though at crooked angles, and the remnants of stone structures lined the ground.

Night had fallen and the ruins were empty, aside from Lucian and myself. The moon bathed the deserted grounds in light from above.

Despite their central location in the capital city, the ruins were preserved for the purpose of being a monument to the ancient history of our kingdom.

We refer to our land as “the Kingdom of Elltoria,” but many other countries call us “Lesser Elltoria.” This is to distinguish us from our former name, “the Great Elltorian Empire.”

The Great Elltorian Empire had once controlled over half of the land on the western continent. Its influence is still felt throughout other countries even now.

Modern language was one such example. The most-spoken language on the western continent was called Elltorian. Other Elltorian dialects were used as well.

Much like English was on Earth, Elltorian was the best language to speak when dealing with international affairs. The countries of the western continent still showed many traces of the Great Elltorian Empire to this day.

Now, our kingdom was located where the capital of the Great Elltorian Empire once stood.

The empire’s golden age was almost a thousand years ago.

But during that time, a string of incompetent rulers caused the land to fracture, and... I won’t go into the whole story, but when the dust settled, we were left with the Kingdom of Elltoria where I lived today.

Elltoria was left with less than 10 percent of the territory we’d possessed under the empire.

If we had any assets to boast of, it was our long history and the number of sorcerers we produced among our highest ranks.

Most people agree that out of hundreds of people, only one or two will

typically possess the magic required to become a sorcerer. But magic does have a genetic element to it as well, and a child born to a sorcerer will often wield excellent powers of their own.

As a result, certain families, even now, produced many skilled sorcerers.

The rulers of the Great Elltorian Empire were made up of many sorcerers, and their descendants, the nobles of Elltoria today, still reflected their numbers. It was why we valued our kingdom's history and our family lineage, though it was also why many nobles looked down on commoners as well.

Nearly 30 percent of high society in Elltoria is composed of sorcerers.

This is a significant number in comparison to most other lands, whose sorcerer populations are less than 1 percent.

Our noble families have many sorcerers among their ranks, but even for commoners, without a drop of sorcerer's blood in their veins, some powerful magicians can still be born by genetic mutation.

It's a rare occurrence, but we have many commoners in our kingdom. The mutation can occur in less than 0.1 percent of all births and still be visible among the population, making— "It looks like your guest has arrived, my lady."

Lucian's voice stirred me from my thoughts.

I cast my gaze off to the distance until I could make out the approaching figure.

"Good evening. I had a feeling I'd see you here," I said.

The one who drew near was not Fritz but a young girl with chestnut-brown hair.

Sumia.

"...What's that supposed to mean?"

Sumia's eyes narrowed in suspicion as she responded to me.

Between that look on her face and her biting attempt at a greeting, she was nothing like the timid, adorable girl I'd seen with Fritz and the others.

"Are you saying you knew that Prince Fritz wasn't the one who sent that

letter? Then why did you come at all?"

"I suspected you were the sender, which was convenient for me, as I've been wanting to speak with you."

"Don't lie. I copied His Highness's handwriting perfectly from the letters I've received from him. How could you know it was me?"

"The 'apology' part was rather telling."

I knew Fritz's personality well enough. There was no way he would send me any kind of guilt-ridden letter like that.

Falling for Sumia had only caused him to become more shortsighted. A man like that would never have such a drastic transformation overnight, even if his father—the king—really did give him a good scolding. It just wasn't believable.

And in the first place...

If Fritz was the kind of man who could easily identify his irrationalities and own up to his actions, he never would have done something as foolish as denounce me publicly in front of the whole world like that.

"Sumia, you're familiar enough with His Highness's personality, no? You can't really think I'd fall for a letter filled with that much 'honor' from a man like him."

"...!"

"Only a few days ago, when I was Prince Fritz's fiancée, such a sweet letter probably would have won me over... But unfortunately, I no longer feel any affinity or loyalty to His Highness."

Witnessing Fritz's utter foolishness, along with the blow that regained me my lost memories, were both enough for me to cast away any feelings I still had left for him. That's why I was so suspicious to receive a letter like that.

"Sumia, why did you want to meet me tonight under false pretenses? I do have a guess or two, but I'd appreciate it if you would just come clean already."

I cast her my best intimidating smile. Sumia shivered in fear.

How rude.

She had no need to act the part of the “delicate baron’s daughter” right now. It seemed like quite the overreaction.

“Don’t act so cocky! Fine, I’ll tell you! I want you to renounce your title and live as a commoner.”

“I’ll have to pass, thank you. Why in heaven’s name would I do such a thing?”

Honestly, now that I had the memories of my past life, there was a part of me that *did* want to give up my responsibilities as a noblewoman and live a carefree commoner’s life.

But after seventeen years of being Laetitia, I knew that my duties and pride weren’t things I could abandon so easily.

“Ha! You don’t get it, do you? I’m only asking for your sake. Imagine if I told Prince Fritz that I wanted you made a commoner because I was scared of your bullying. Wouldn’t you rather do it voluntarily than under His Highness’s orders?”

She smiled triumphantly. I felt a headache coming on.

I understood that I was in her way, but there was no justifying a request like that.

“...So, you’re serious, then? You intend to make me a commoner when I’ve done nothing wrong? This will lead to a serious clash between noble families. Do you have the slightest idea what will happen to the kingdom if you do this?”

“His Highness is head over heels for me, just so you know. He’ll do whatever I ask of him.”

“...I think you might be right about that.”

The accuracy of that statement was the cause of my headache.

Fritz, the crown prince, had lost all his senses in love.

He’d already banished me from the kingdom entirely. I had no reason to think he wouldn’t go as far as trying to strip me of my title too.

“His Highness will probably bow to your every request.”

“Exactly! You get it, don’t you? So do as I say and relinquish yo—”

“Nirz Village.”

“...!”

Sumia’s smile faltered when she heard that.

“You said you were born and raised here in the capital, but that was a lie, wasn’t it? You’re from the small village of Nirz, which is territory under your father’s domain.”

“.....”

She fell completely silent.

The expression on her face—twisted into a fearful grimace—showed me plainly that I was correct.

“And that’s not the only lie you’ve told. You don’t have a drop of noble blood in your veins, do you? Both of your parents are the most average of commoners.”

“...H-How do you know that?!”

“I’ve always thought it was strange.”

The clue was in the genetics of magic.

“The amount and type of magic you possess is heavily dependent on your family’s bloodline. But your father...well, the baron you claim as your father, has no other Light Magic users like you in his family tree.”

“...What’s so strange about that?! Non-Light families can still have Light-using children! I wouldn’t be the first!!”

“Sure, it could be a mutation... But don’t you think a few details seem...*off* about that?”

“No, I don’t!”

“You, a rare wielder of Light Magic, were suddenly born into a noble family. But before you turned thirteen, that family had no idea of your powers. And then, despite having no education or experience as a noblewoman, you were still able to get close to the crown prince.”

A baron’s bastard child, raised as a commoner, is revealed to possess

incredible powers. She then meets the prince, her soulmate, and the two fall in love.

It reminded me of romance novels from my past life, actually. But to see these events play out in front of me in the real world, well, that was more than fishy to me.

“Any of those points would be unlikely on their own. But all of them happening to the same girl? No, that’s not just luck. How could I not find it suspicious?”

My theory was that the baron himself had masterminded this plan, along with the Ilegar family—including their son, Ilius the Glasses Creep.

The Ilegars and the Gramwells were political opponents. My marriage plans with Fritz weren’t something they’d just take lying down.

The baron was a distant relative of theirs, and he’d informed the Ilegars that he’d discovered a young girl who could use Light Magic. He then claimed her as his own daughter, the families declared her the second coming of the Goddess, and they used their political ties to push her closer to the crown prince.

It was a plan so outrageous, they probably never even expected it to work.

But Fritz, for better or for worse, was completely fooled by Sumia’s darling, innocent act. That was the final piece of the puzzle, and the Ilegar family got everything they wanted.

But the plan was supposed to stop there. I was sure the Ilegars and Glasses Creep himself never expected Fritz to end our engagement in such a public setting.

I had no proof, but I suspected Sumia went rogue that day when she told Fritz I pushed her down a staircase. Sumia most likely wanted to get me out of the way as soon as possible, so she went behind the Ilegars’ back and made up lies about me without consulting the family first.

As a result, Fritz believed her, lost his senses, and called off our engagement in front of a crowd of witnesses.

All of this was speculation on my part, but I felt confident it was close to the

truth. Glasses Creep looked so panicked when it all went down, well, it was almost funny. It was an obvious sign that things had not gone according to his plans.

“I’ve been suspicious of you for some time, so I had your past investigated. I learned all about your true identity and the village you came from.”

“...You sure make it sound simple.” Sumia bit down hard on her lower lip. “My past was concealed very carefully, I’ll have you know.”

“After telling so many lies, you really think there was no evidence left to be found? My servants are highly skilled. With them on the job, it was only a matter of time before we found what we were looking for.”

I sung my servants’ praises with my head held high.

Lucian, my head servant, and everyone under him were all commoners of exceptional talent. Their upbringings also made them all the more perceptive when it came to understanding fellow commoners.

It was all thanks to their efforts and father’s connections that the investigation succeeded, and we were able to uncover Sumia’s past.

“Sumia, I won’t allow you to meddle in my affairs any longer. The only reason you were able to become His Highness’s fiancée was your so-called ‘noble blood.’ You understand how classist the people of this kingdom are, don’t you? It won’t be pretty if His Highness or his father find out who you really are.”

“...! You’re bluffing!!” she screamed. “If you had any proof about who I was, you’d have already revealed it to the whole world! This whole thing is just a trick!! I bet you don’t have a single scrap of evidence!!”

“...You just don’t know when to give up, do you?”

With a sigh, Lucian removed a piece of paper from his breast pocket.

I mentally praised him for his good timing. I took the paper and began to read it aloud.

“Sumia. Birth name: Merrow. Seventeen years of age. Third daughter of Griada and Diersen. Born in Nirz Village...”

The more I read, the paler Sumia’s face grew, until she was the color of candle

wax.

It appeared she finally understood just how much I knew about her true identity.

“...You get it now, don’t you? All I have to do is say the word, and you’ll be facing charges for impersonating a noble.”

“...Liar.”

Sumia wrenched her trembling lips apart to speak.

Her eyes were wide with fear. She was desperate to deny the facts before her.

“Why are you doing this?! I don’t understand! If you figured out that much, you could destroy me whenever you wanted! Well?! What are you waiting for?!”

“I don’t see the point in it. Do you?” I calmly explained the facts to Sumia, who was starting to break down. “If I’d been a month earlier in getting to the bottom of it all, I would have informed His Highness in secret. But if there’s one thing I’m sure of, it’s that I wouldn’t have revealed my findings publicly.”

“And why is that?!”

“I’d have to be a real fool, wouldn’t I? If the public found out that the crown prince had become infatuated with a liar of such proportions...it would be a huge scandal for the royal family, and therefore the kingdom itself.”

“...!”

“But still, even if I *had* known just a little earlier, I don’t think it would have changed a thing. How could it? Revealing your true identity on that day wouldn’t make Fritz take me back. It would only serve to hurt his reputation, being the foolish prince who fell for such a wicked scheme. Furthermore, it would be a greater insult to myself, a duke’s daughter, and to my entire family as well.”

I shrugged.

“All of that is still true today. If I exposed your lies, I’d only be hurting the royal family’s reputation, and it would also ruin Fritz’s chances of finding a

suitable fiancée. For now, I feel like it's better to let you hold that title."

It wasn't just Sumia—she had the support of the Ilegar family behind her too.

As long as they knew of her true past, there was no way Sumia could betray that family by doing anything stupid. She was a puppet to do their bidding.

On top of that, by accepting my unfair punishment without making a fuss, the royal family would now be indebted to the Gramwells.

I wasn't going to just let Glasses Creep get away with it all. I knew that if anyone had a plan to stop the Ilegars, it was my father.

"Sumia, I'd wager that calling me out here tonight was your own plan, right? I'll be informing Glasses Cr—Ilius of your actions to be sure his family monitors you much more strictly. I hope you'll put more thought into your future actions."

I'd said my part. My business with Sumia was finished.

Just as I turned around, ready to return home with Lucian...

"Looks like words won't be enough."

Four walls of light suddenly formed a barrier around me.

With a sigh, I turned back around to face her. Through the glimmering walls of the cage, I could make out Sumia's bloodshot eyes glaring at me.

"It's all your fault!!"

"And? What exactly is this meant to accomplish?"

"You can't break my walls with your magic! You'll be trapped in there while I call for help!"

"What, you want to silence me? Do you really think that will work?"

Obviously, there were more copies of that report back at home. If she killed me here, there'd be no doubt as to the identity of the culprit.

Not that I had any intention of letting her do such a thing.

The cage of light looked to be over ten feet tall on every side.

The space above me was sealed off too. I was completely enclosed.

Even when she wasn't enraged, Sumia possessed a large amount of magical energy. I knew the walls around me would be incredibly strong.

However, I could easily destroy this barrier with my magic. It would just take some craftiness on my part.

If I started a fire in this enclosed space, there was a good chance I wouldn't be able to avoid the flames.

"...All right. Let's give it a try, shall we?"

Once I made sure Lucian was at a safe distance, I turned my attention to the wall before me.

It was Water Magic that this situation demanded. Thanks to my newly improved energy flow, water was now simple for me to handle, even though it used to be my weakness.

Focus. Focus. And then, chant the spell.

My target was in front of me—I was going to strike just at the right angle to avoid Sumia, who was smiling at me smugly, as well as the surrounding ruins.

...Release.

"What...?"

Sumia's mouth fell open as she watched her walls of light begin to break.

The tiny crack in the wall splintered out into a web of fissures.

Barriers may be strong on their own, but they fall apart when they're even slightly disturbed.

I'd used the same "transmutation" technique as I did with the whisk, but this time on water. I could create the water with my spell and control its shape however I wanted. Over and over I compressed it, then sent it flying in a beam.

It was supposed to act like a water jet cutter—a tool I knew from my past life.

This was a technique I'd practiced as a countermeasure against Sumia's Light Magic, and it finally came to use.

"This can't be happening..."

Sumia sank to the ground across from the crumbling wall of light.

She was devastated to see her precious Light Magic be destroyed...or so I thought at first, but that didn't seem to be the whole story.

Fwish.

Sumia's brown hair was severed just below her chin. The strands caught the moonlight and glimmered as they fell to the ground.

It looked as if the water blade had barely missed her neck.

...Oh no. That wasn't supposed to happen.

I smiled at Sumia, who was still pale-faced and trembling, hoping she wouldn't notice my mistake.

That water blade wasn't supposed to hit Sumia when I discharged it. But I'd never used magic like that in a practical situation, so my aim wasn't as accurate as I'd hoped.

I missed the mark and just barely grazed the side of Sumia's neck, by the look of it.

Things could have gotten bloody. Horrifyingly, I'd almost sent her whole head flying off her body.

This world wasn't as safe as the life I experienced in Japan, and therefore, I was always prepared to defend myself if the time came. Still, the former office worker in me who was used to peace and harmony didn't actually want to resort to pointless violence.

What I really wanted was to avoid a sudden R-rated, gory twist in my life story. It would definitely haunt my dreams for the rest of my life.

...Attack spells are no joke. I have to be really careful with these.

With that lesson tucked away in my heart, I observed my surroundings and was relieved to see the water hadn't harmed any of the ruins.

That was way too close.

These ruins were a thousand years old. They were an irreplaceable part of our history, just like a World Heritage Site back on Earth. Silently, I breathed a sigh

of relief to see I hadn't damaged them because of my careless mistake.



“**GOOD** thing it only cut your hair. That could have been much worse...”

Sumia shuddered in response to Laetitia's remark.

She sensed the intention behind her words—it was a clear threat.

Laetitia was warning Sumia that she could send her head flying whenever she felt like it. She let her off easy this time, only taking a bit of her hair, but Laetitia's powers could be deadly whenever she wanted them to be.

Sumia was humiliated, enraged, and defeated.

The distinct feeling of fear was sending her heart into disarray.

Sumia's latent Light Magic made people call her the second coming of the Goddess. She truly believed that her magic was unrivaled in power.

But Laetitia had shattered her light walls in an instant, then smiled over her like it was nothing.

“...How?” Sumia raised her voice. “How can you stand there and act so confident?!”

The dam inside her broke, and she unloaded all her emotions onto Laetitia.

“Something's wrong with you!! Why are you always acting so cocky all the time?! Did you forget that I stole your fiancé?! He made a fool out of you in front of the whole world when he abandoned you! So why are you still...?!”

Sumia grit her teeth.

She had stolen the crown prince from Laetitia.

Sumia would be the crown princess—the highest title a woman could obtain in the kingdom.

She'd been completely victorious. She was the reigning champion in her battle against Laetitia.

She won everything. Laetitia lost. Until now, Sumia had believed those facts without an ounce of hesitation.

“So why are you still acting like this...?”

Acting like Sumia was the true loser.

Like she’d wandered down the wrong path and didn’t even realize it.

As she stood there, her heart filled with shame and regret, Sumia couldn’t help but wonder if maybe that was true.



“...**WHY?** Didn’t you feel ashamed to have your fiancé stolen away...?” Sumia whimpered.

I thought about her question for a bit and decided to respond.

“I do feel a little disappointed in myself that I let you get so far... But, ashamed? No, I wouldn’t say so.”

“...What do you mean? Everyone watched me take him from you.”

Sumia clearly couldn’t believe her ears.

“In comparison to Prince Fritz, what do I have to be ashamed of?” I asked her resolutely. “He’s the man who let himself be completely fooled by you while he was still engaged to me, then ended it all without ever considering the consequences of his actions. I have no respect for him as a man or as a person. So no, I don’t feel ashamed to have been abandoned by someone like that...”

Sure, when he called off our engagement, I was shaken up in the moment...

But after calming down, I realized just how unfit he was to be crown prince.

Even though he was still my fiancé only a few days ago, now whenever I thought about Fritz’s personality and actions, all I felt was repulsed by the man.

“I have no intention of forgiving the two of you for what you’ve done to me... But in a way, I’m actually grateful. You’re the person who freed me of my obligations to His Highness.”

My only regret, and it was truly a painful one, was the trouble I caused Father by ruining my marriage plans.

However, the truth was still that I was enormously relieved to be free of Fritz. Until now, I’d respected him as the crown prince, and even cared for him as a

person to an extent...but the way he treated me, that day I regained my memories, was all I needed to see of him to rid myself of that attachment.

“...I don’t believe you. I take your fiancé, and now you’re thanking me...”

Sumia was arguing back, but her voice had lost all force.

Perhaps she understood my logic more than she wanted to let on.

I had no reason to believe that Sumia truly loved Fritz at all. Her only interest was becoming the crown princess. The way she clung to Fritz and seduced him with her charming words were both just a means to that end.

She was also probably smart enough to understand exactly how foolish Fritz was.

Now that I thought about it, Sumia might be on the brink of a life of hardships, being married to a man like that.

The only thing he loved was Sumia’s disguise. He probably wouldn’t lose interest in her, so long as she kept up the act, but still, that wasn’t “true love” in any sense of the phrase.

On top of it all, as appealing as the title of crown princess seemed to look, nothing in life came without a price. Being the princess would mean years upon years of responsibilities that Glasses Creep and his family wouldn’t allow her to simply ignore.

All that was left for Sumia was to play out her life as the puppet princess with a man she didn’t even love. Deep down, Sumia might already be aware of that fate.

When I looked at Sumia, who was on the verge of tears, I couldn’t imagine anything else.

“My lady, it appears someone else has arrived,” Lucian whispered into my ear.

I glanced around at our surroundings and spotted a figure with glasses frames that lit up under the light of the moon.

It was Ilius, the Glasses Creep.

“Oh my. Good evening. What brings you here so late at night?” I asked with a smile.

“...Her. I’m just here to retrieve Sumia.”

Ilius pushed his glasses up and looked away from me to hide his expression.

“I shouldn’t have let Sumia get away so easily, but tonight’s events could have been avoided if you didn’t fall for such a stupid letter.”

“Oh, is that right? Well, I think you ought to keep a better eye on her, myself. You don’t want to ruin all the work you put into ending my engagement, do you?”

Ilius didn’t seem to want to take any responsibility, so I decided not to hold back with my response.

I knew he was smart enough to figure out what had happened between Sumia and me.

He understood the situation and still made no attempt to apologize to me. This is why he really earned the “Creep” in “Glasses Creep.”

On the inside, I was cursing those glasses of his to break into a million pieces.

Truthfully, he was only acting in his own best interests as a nobleman, but that didn’t make it any less irritating.

A good punch to those glasses would probably make a nice sound...

“Ilius, since you’re here, let me give you a present.”

“...Can I refuse? I already know I’m not going to like it.”

“That’s correct. Here’s your reward: a report that I think you’ll find very interesting.”

I took the paper from Lucian and held it out to Ilius. He reluctantly took it from my hand.

It was a copy of my investigation into Sumia’s background.

Ilius’s face soured as he quickly scanned its contents.

“...What is it you’re after? You want me to keep Sumia on a tighter leash so

her past stays a secret? Is this a demand to keep you and your family out of all this?"

"You're as quick-witted as always. Though, I'd also ask you to keep Sumia and Prince Fritz under closer observation. I don't want them doing anything that could harm the kingdom."

"...I can't promise it, but I'll let my father know."

"I appreciate it."

I smiled softly at him, knowing it would come across as menacing. Hopefully that would be enough of a warning for the Ilegar family.

Leaving the kingdom peacefully meant the royal family would be indebted to us. Even if Sumia took my place as the crown princess, she would have no way of hurting my family.

"...By the way, Ilius, may I ask you about something that's still bothering me?"

"What's that?"

"You chose to cooperate in the plot by faking Sumia's past and helping her cozy up to the prince, isn't that right? It only worked out because His Highness was even more foolish than you imagined, but it was a dangerous plan with a slim chance of success from the start. Why would you ever want to be a part of it?"

It never made sense to me.

Ilius was by no means a good person, but he was smart. I had no doubt he possessed a strategic mind. That's why it was such a surprise to see him cooperate in setting Sumia up with Fritz.

I knew his family was likely the source of his orders, but I didn't see how they could force someone like Ilius into participating in their plot.

"...What's so strange about that? My father, the duke, asked for my help, and I had no good reason to turn him down."

It didn't feel like a clear answer, but I could tell I wasn't going to get anything else out of him. He probably had his own circumstances to consider, and there was no way he would share that information with his enemy, so I decided to let

it go.

“I see. That makes sense. I’m sorry I asked such an odd question.”

With that, I was ready to bid farewell to Ilius, who looked deeply uncomfortable, when...

“Are those hoofbeats?”

I could faintly make out the sound of hooves approaching our location.

The noise grew louder until its source was finally visible before us.

“The devil?!” cried Ilius.

The person who appeared, glaring down at us like a demon on his large black horse...

“Laetitia, are you all right?!”

...was none other than my father. Most certainly not the devil.

The moonlight cast that menacing face of his in heavy shadows. It was enough to scare even me, his own daughter, for a moment. Naturally, the others were even more frightened. Ilius was frozen in shock. Sumia was visibly terrified. Only Lucian was unaffected as he stood at my side.

Lucian’s truly cut from a different cloth.

I expected nothing less from my capable (future) butler.

After a bit of mental praise for Lucian, I turned to look up at my father on his horse.

“Why have you come here, Father? I thought you’d be working through the night.”

“How foolish you are!!” he barked back at me.

The anger on his face certainly did resemble the devil.

“What’s more important than my daughter’s well-being?! How could I go on living if something ever happened to you...?” Father yelled.

He let out a deep sigh as he rubbed his temples.

Rage, anguish, and relief—his exhalation carried traces of each emotion.

“...I sincerely apologize for worrying you, Father...”

“...You scared me half to death. How could you run out of the house in the middle of the night without telling me where you were going?”

“I didn’t want to cause any trouble for you. I thought Lucian and I could make do without your assistance, just this once...”

That’s why I left the mansion quietly that night, so as not to alert anyone. I thought I could finish conducting my business and make it back before Father even noticed I was gone.

“I’m so sorry. It was selfish of me to do this by myself...”

“...Don’t apologize, Laetitia. You’re not the person who owes me an apology here,” Father growled, taking his hands away from his face.

His face was back to its usual stern, intimidating expression.

“You’re the third son of the Ilegar family, and you’re His Highness’s new fiancée, Sumia. Do I have that right?”

Sumia shuddered to be on the receiving end of his piercing gaze.

“Just what’s the meaning of this? Calling my daughter out here in the middle of the night...”

The question was heavy with implications—as if their very lives depended on what answers they gave.

But Father was a government official, so of course, it would never actually come to that...

The fact that the idea even appeared in my mind was just proof of how frightening he presented himself.

“Lord Gramwell, I’m afraid you’re mistaken. We meant no harm toward Lady Laetitia.”

Ilius was the one who spoke, drawing Father’s eyes away from Sumia, who was still trembling off to the side.

Glasses Creep showed no hesitation on his face, though I’d expect nothing less from him. He responded to Father with flawless manners and carefully

chosen words.

“You meant no harm? Then why did you call her all the way out here? What discussion has to take place in such an isolated area?”

“...Sometimes young people like to chat among themselves where they won’t be spotted by others.”

“They like to chat, huh? And you there, Sumia. Would you like to explain what happened to your hair? Did you do something to my daughter to make her strike back at you?”

“...!!”

Sumia turned her head, biting hard on her bottom lip.

Father let out a chuckle as he stared down at her.

“Hmph. When I heard you stole the prince away from my daughter, I imagined you’d be a fine young lady of good character, but now I see you for what you are... Illegal boy, your father will be hearing about this, and I won’t back down until I receive an apology. But I’ll let you go for now. Take Sumia back to your home and start thinking of an explanation for your father.”

“...Thank you for your generous response.”

Ilius bowed and grabbed Sumia’s arm.

I could still see the regret in her eyes as they departed in the opposite direction of Father.

He kept his glare fixed on them until they were out of sight. He then dismounted the horse and stood before me.

“Laetitia...”

“Father...”

The moonlight illuminated us from above as we faced each other in silence.

After everything that happened, I could hardly bear to look him in the eye, but I knew better than to break his gaze.

“You still won’t come to me when you need help... I wish I was a more reliable father in your eyes.”

“That’s not it. I trust you, and I know more than anyone how reliable you are.”

“...I don’t want to hear your flattery. Ever since we lost Selina, your mother, I’ve struggled with how to approach you. That much is true.”

“No, Father. You’re the one who taught me what it means to be a noblewoman, and I know how much you’ve protected me throughout my life. You even helped me in my studies to become the crown princess.”

My father was always acting in my best interest. Though, it was true I’d always felt a sense of distance between us. After all, the man never so much as smiled...

But regaining the memories of my past life meant I now had a more objective view of parent-child relationships. I knew there was no reason to doubt the love my Father had for me.

“Laetitia, I’m blessed to have a daughter as bright as you...able to understand my feelings even when I fail to express them properly... That’s why I arranged for your engagement to His Highness. I thought it would be a good use of your talents...”

His expression stiffened. I imagined the look on his face could knock out a person all on its own.

“...And yet, that half-witted prince had the gall to break up with you and banish you from the kingdom in front of a crowd. I can’t believe it came to that... I’ll never forgive myself for betrothing you to a man like that.”

“Father...”

“I know how hard you’ve been working to become the crown princess, and all this time, I’ve never heard a single demand of yours. I’m sorry if it’s too late, but...if there’s anything at all I can do for you, I don’t want you to hesitate to ask.”

Father was serious. It didn’t seem like he would stand down until I made some kind of request.

“...I see. In that case, will you smile for me, Father?”

“...I don’t understand.” Father’s voice was low and serious. “Is that really what

you want, Laetitia...?”

“Is something wrong with that? It’s not that I question how much you care about me, but I was hoping to see it in a more visible expression...”

“Er, I don’t...”

“Can’t you do it for me?”

“...Very well. Prepare yourself, Laetitia.”

Prepare myself?

I stared at my father, wondering what he could mean.

“!!”

Terrifying. It’s downright terrifying!

That was my immediate reaction to seeing Father smile at me.

Right...that’s a smile.

Logically, I knew he was smiling...

But the expression on his face was overwhelmingly intense. Frankly, it made him look completely evil. His already stony face was intimidating enough as it was.

The smile not only failed to soften his looks but somehow made him appear even more threatening. Father looked like he was hatching some kind of scheme. Any child who saw him like that would surely burst into tears.

“Father...y-your smile...”

“...Frightening, right? I know. I discovered long ago that I appear to be one of the worst smilers in all the world... When you were a child, I once made the mistake of smiling at you, only to have you burst into tears and start avoiding me for a while... I’ve been trying to prevent that from happening again, so I thought it best not to smile at all...”

“...I’m sorry.”

An apology was all I could muster in response.

I had just finished thinking about how his smile could make children bawl, but

I had no idea that I'd been a victim myself... Children can truly be cruel creatures.

"So you've never smiled at me because you thought it would frighten me?"

The realization knocked the wind out of me.

Father was always an "awkward" man. He'd lost his wife, worked his fingers to the bone at all times, and struggled with how to approach his only daughter. I already knew all this...but now it felt different.

My father excelled as a public servant while struggling with his personal life. Sometimes both sides of him came out at once...

"That's right. Your older brothers also warned me about how horrid my smile is... It's always saddened me to know that you inherited my looks."

"...Huh? Wait a moment. What are you talking about?" The response came out of my mouth automatically. It was completely unexpected. "I resemble Mother, don't I? When I look at her portraits, it feels like I'm looking in a mirror."

"...Your faces are similar, sure. You have Selina's stunning beauty, but...when you smile, you look like me. I've seen it on your face many times."

Are you kidding me?!

I whisked my hand mirror out of my dress pocket, eager to prove him wrong.

Thankfully, after I flashed a quick smile, the only thing I saw was the reflection of a blonde girl with a pleasant expression.

"Take a look, Father. How is this anything like your smile?"

"Yes, I know, you smile like an angel at times... But let's try something. Imagine the prince is here with you. Think about smiling at that boy, being sure not to show any signs of weakness at the same time."

"Imagine the prince..."

I pictured him in my mind.

In all the time we spent together, I always tried my best to project nothing but confidence around Fritz. I didn't want to bring any shame upon myself, so I

hid the weaker sides of my personality.

“...What the...?!”

I'd accidentally let out a cry unbecoming of a young lady.

My reflection was now showing the face of an undeniably villainous girl.

Shocked, I glared back at the mirror. My eyes had narrowed menacingly, and my lips were curled up into an overbearing smile. Even I didn't want to go near the girl I was looking at. It was certainly successful at not presenting weakness... but something so evil wasn't my objective either.

It wasn't as overpowering as my father's smile, but the fact that it was attached to a seventeen-year-old girl somehow made it all the more intimidating.

Father's DNA really did this to me?

I shuddered. Our blood relation was on full display—that much was certain.

Even after two years of attending the academy, I could count the number of classmates I'd made as “friends” on one hand. I always assumed that was normal, considering my own rank, as well as how busy I was with studying to become the crown princess.

But with this sinister smile, my standing as a duke's daughter, and the future title as the crown princess on top of it all, I must have been very difficult to approach.

And how had I never seen this smile in the mirror before...?

I suppose it's difficult to get an objective look at your own face and expressions.

Now that I had my memories of my past life, it was even more shocking to see the evil girl staring back at me in the mirror.

I'd only just discovered how dominating my smile was, but already, I had the sinking realization that it explained what had happened with Fritz and Sumia.

I had no intention of forgiving the prince, nor did I believe any blame rested with me...

But I couldn't help but wonder if Fritz felt intimidated, being with a girl who always had such a threatening smile on her face.

Very well. I'll improve. I'll get myself a better smile.

At that moment, I swore to rid myself of my dreadfully villainous looks.



I couldn't stay focused on the shock of my evil smile forever.

Father and I decided it was best to leave such an isolated area sooner rather than later, so he returned home on his horse, while I took the carriage parked near the ruins.

After we arrived, I freshened up in my room, then headed to Father's study, where he'd asked to meet me.

Despite the late hour, he had something he needed to tell me, and that was why he changed his work schedule to come home early and ended up noticing I was missing.

"How would you like to marry King Glenreed and become the queen of the Kingdom of Wolfvarte?" Father asked me.

This was an option I never expected to hear.

I, his daughter of marriageable age, was being expelled from the kingdom.

One natural resolution was to have me enter a political marriage with someone outside of Elltoria.

As a young lady of noble blood, I had already accepted such an outcome. And yet...

"Father, are you sure that's a good idea? Seeing as how Prince Fritz...the crown prince of this kingdom rid himself of me, how can I marry the king of another land...?"

It didn't make any logical sense.

Even though it was entirely Fritz's decision to end our engagement, I could never escape the reputation I'd earned as the woman rejected by the crown prince. It should be unthinkable for me to immediately become the queen of

another kingdom after only just having my engagement to a prince broken off.

“Does that idea scare you, Laetitia? I can reject the offer if it’s not to your liking...”

“No, that’s not it. I’m just very confused. I know King Glenreed as the young ruler who’s achieved many victories in battles with neighboring lands. They’ve even given him the moniker ‘Silver Wolf King.’ I don’t understand why a man like that would want me as his queen... And if the rumors I’ve heard are true, King Glenreed quite despises women, does he not?”

“Exactly. He hates women. So you’re aware of the state of his private life.”

“I am. He’s already had four potential candidates to become the queen but never settled on any of them to marry.”

“Correct. But King Glenreed will be turning twenty-four this year, and the aristocrats of his kingdom are demanding he settle down and have children. Since he hates women, and considering the internal pressure, he doesn’t want to pick another candidate for queen from his own kingdom yet.”

“...And so that’s why he chose me.”

Now it made sense.

A woman of high status would normally be sought to become the queen, but few women would be up for this particular task, knowing what they did about his character.

On top of that, around half of the people of Wolfvarte were known as “beastfolk”—humans who possessed animal ears and tails.

Few of the lands in our western continent viewed beastfolk as their equals. I imagined that made it even harder to find a willing queen from outside their own kingdom.

“In other words, he wants me as a placeholder queen to take the pressure off himself for the time being. I’ll just need to keep a respectable distance from King Glenreed, forget any ideas of winning his favor, enter a ‘white marriage’ with him, and fulfill my duty as a figurehead queen.”

A white marriage.

This is one type of political marriage carried out in our world, where the two parties never share a physical relationship with each other.

“If I recall correctly, Wolfvartian laws dictate that white marriages are declared invalid if a child isn’t conceived within two years. After that, the two parties can divorce without any repercussions.”

“Exactly. Even when it comes to obscure places, you sure know your stuff.”

I never imagined my training as the future crown princess would come to use for something like this.

But Father’s smile and the praise directed at me certainly made it worth it.

His smile was the usual fiendish one that could make even the fiercest of warriors cower, but I was still happy to see it.

“Two years. I’ll be a figurehead queen for two years, so that King Glenreed stops being pressured to take a wife and have children. That’s all, right?”

“You’ve got it. After those two years, you could come back home, or if you take a liking to that kingdom, King Glenreed promised me he would provide you with a home and living expenses so that you could stay there.”

“I see...”

I thought about it for a bit. Nothing about the idea struck me as unfavorable.

Getting married was a natural step in the lives of all young noblewomen. But for me, well, I had a bad history with the crown prince now. Any man that still wanted to marry me after that might not be up to *my* standards. But even if the title carried no real weight, becoming the queen of another kingdom wouldn’t lower my family’s reputation. It wasn’t a bad option at all.

“I’ll say it again, Laetitia—you’re allowed to refuse if this isn’t what you want. If there’s some boy out there you have your heart set on, I’ll sit down and talk with him, and once I’ve nearly beaten the life out of him, I’ll give him my blessing to marry you.”

“...That doesn’t sound like a joke when you say it, Father.”

I felt my face twitch in response.

Father wasn't easy to read, but I knew just how much he loved me. If I ever turned up with an unworthy man, well, I could already imagine the bloodbath it would turn into.

"Rest assured, Father. I'm not interested in any particular man, nor are any men interested in me."

Though, saying it out loud was a little disheartening.

I'd spent a few years with Fritz as my fiancé, but since training to become the crown princess kept me so busy, I had no spare time to dwell on romance. Even in my past life, I was overwhelmed with work every single day, and I never had a moment to even think about meeting someone or starting a relationship. That made for two whole lives where I'd spent years without experiencing romance. It was a depressing fact, so I decided not to think about it too much.

"What's got you so sad, Laetitia? If you really *have* found someone special, you can tell me."

"No, it's nothing. I'm all right... I'd be lying if I said I had no interest in love and marriage, but I'm still a duke's daughter. If I agree to become King Glenreed's bride, I'm sure I'll win favor with our king as well, and it's not like it'd be an easy task for me to find a true husband after recent events. I'll be allowed to return home after two years are up, right?"

"Indeed. And, of course, your brothers and I will be ready to welcome you home when the time comes. You'll be able to pursue work and hobbies as well. If you fall for someone, you'll finally be able to settle down with them, or at least I hope so."

Father's love for me was apparent whenever he talked about my future.

It sounded like King Glenreed didn't actually have any interest in taking a bride. I was to secure a good reputation for my family and my kingdom, but then, my freedom was guaranteed. When I thought of it as a job, ignoring the context of love and romance, it sounded like a fine marriage to agree to.

"I'd like to accept the offer. Is there anything else I should know in advance?"

"I'm not sure how important this is, but...Laetitia, you enjoy cooking, right? I've watched you come alive lately, whenever you're in that kitchen... I haven't

seen you look so happy in years—not since you became engaged to His Highness, at least.”

“Oh my, Father. Have you been spying on me in the kitchen?”

I broke eye contact with him. It was a bit embarrassing to hear.

He’d seen me cooking away as I hummed cheerful songs to myself.

I even remembered feeling a sharp gaze on me in the kitchen at times. I was starting to keep watch for assassins and everything.

But it appeared that Father’s eyes inherently carried a certain intensity, wherever they looked.

“Well, as you’ve seen, I do love to cook, though I know it’s not the ideal hobby for a noblewoman...”

“It’s rare, sure...but only for noblewomen of our kingdom.”

“Our kingdom? Does that mean...”

I detected something more in Father’s words. Something I was eager to hear.

“You guessed it. Wolfvartian women of high status are also known to cook. It’s a much more accepted hobby than it is in our kingdom.”

Hell yes! That’s awesome!

Mentally, I was pumping my fist in the air.

“It’s the whole reason I decided to share this offer with y—”

“Thank you so very much, Father! I accept this offer in its entirety!”

A figurehead queen with a time limit of two years.

I wouldn’t be expected to concern myself with political matters or physical ones. I’d have all the time in the world to myself.

With this new opportunity to take to the kitchen, I silently reveled in my excitement.



AFTER that discussion, I began to carry out the plans for my marriage within a few days.

Between King Glenreed requesting my presence sooner rather than later, and the route to Wolfvarte becoming more dangerous with the changing of the seasons, there were many reasons to rush.

“Have you forgotten anything, Laetitia? Did you get enough sleep? How about your health? Are you feeling all right?”

Father seemed more anxious about the journey than I did. He was pacing the room as he questioned me. Despite his busy schedule, he’d come to see me off.

“Please try to calm down, Father. I’ll have Lucian with me all the way, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? You don’t have to put on a brave face for me, you know.”

I chuckled, seeing him so insistent.

His face looked as nefarious as ever, but the words he spoke made his intentions obvious—he was simply a father deeply worried about sending his daughter away.

The contrast between his appearance and his heart was as amusing as ever.

“I’m more concerned with how you’ll fare, Father. There’s something I’d like you to handle for me while I’m away.”

“And what’s that?”

“Here.”

I handed him a stack of papers I’d written up.

“What do we have here...?”

“I gathered a list of the meals I’d like you to try and wrote down each recipe here. You’ve been looking quite pale lately, and I’m sure that’s in part because you’ve been working so hard for my sake, but I don’t think that’s all.”

“Hmm. Then what is it?”

“You eat too much rich food. Of course, salt and spices can make a meal very delicious...but consuming too much isn’t good for your health. I read about it as part of my royal education. That same book also included recipes for lighter

dishes, so I tried sprucing them up a bit.”

“I see. I knew you’d gained a sudden passion for cooking, but I had no idea you were this concerned for me...”

Father’s face was overwhelmed with emotion. Of course, it only made him look sinister.

He was terrifying on the outside, but in his heart, he was a good man who cared intensely for his daughter.

As his child, I wanted Father to live a long and healthy life. With Father’s combination of anger issues and high blood pressure, if he ended up passing away while I was in another kingdom, I would never forgive myself.

Fortunately, the two of us shared the same love of food. Like me, Father didn’t seem to be too enthusiastic about all the rich foods he ate either. When I borrowed the kitchen to make my second batch of ice cream, I could see how much he enjoyed it after I brought him a bowl to try.

I’ll just say that it was quite a shock to see a stone-faced man like my father breaking out into such a tender smile over ice cream.

“I didn’t have a lot of time to work on this recipe book, so there are still parts missing. If you need help handling any of the ingredients, could you let the kitchen staff take care of it for you?”

I turned around to look back at our manor.

All the chefs stood outside in a row, ready to see me off on my journey.

We had gotten to know one another better after I started spending time in the kitchen. Each and every one of them was a talented cook worthy of serving a noble family.

They also worked hard to improve their talents. The staff had been very interested in the recipes I remembered from my past life on Earth, and we even shared culinary information as well.

My knowledge of cooking and practical experience all came from my past life. In this one, I’d never cooked anything before. Just like the whisk, there were many other utensils that differed from what I knew. Even with “cheats” like my

magic, it still took a whole lot of trial and error, despite the help of all the chefs.

We continued to work out our culinary problems together, and a sense of camaraderie had formed between us along the way... Well, I didn't know if they felt it, but I sure did.

Our societal statuses were vastly different, but I believed the desire for delicious food was human nature in every world. I couldn't transform Elltoria's food culture all on my own, but when it came to my father's health, a change seemed much more within reach.

Many of the kitchen staff also seemed displeased with the current trend of adding so many spices to meals, so this change was a blessing to them too.

After leaving my book of Earth recipes with Father and the chefs, it was time for me to depart for Wolfvarte and finally meet the Silver Wolf King.

Father's recipe book...

At that time, I had no idea that something so insignificant would shake up the food culture and future of our kingdom forever...



IT was the day of Laetitia's departure from her homeland, when she was to meet and marry Glenreed, the Silver Wolf King.

Ilius, the third son of the prime minister, was sporting a gloomy look from behind his glasses.

"Hey! Are you even listening?! I wanna go see His Highness already!"

Sumia, with her freshly cut chestnut hair, was throwing a fit in front of him.

After the skirmish with Laetitia at the ruins, Sumia couldn't exactly hide what had happened to her hair, so she decided to cut the rest of it off at chin length.

"Hehe! Please don't worry, Your Highness. I just wanted to try something new, you know? Well? Do you like it?"

She'd given her best effort in charming her fiancé, but apparently, she was actually pretty upset about her haircut. Around Ilius, Sumia didn't have to hide her true emotions.

Ilius sighed for what felt like the millionth time that day, now finding himself on the receiving end of the girl's frustration.

"You're the one who needs to listen, Sumia. If you want to see the prince, remember my teachings and use them to finish this problem."

"I'm already doing it! It's done, isn't it?!"

"No, it's not. This answer isn't good enough. Start over with the theory and do it again."

He wasted no time in shutting down Sumia's demand.

Ilius had assigned her homework but was unimpressed with her response.

The topic was "appropriate manners and etiquette in relation to the royal family."

Sumia shouldn't have had any trouble completing the homework if she applied herself, but unfortunately, she lacked the focus to actually get the job done.

With another sigh, Ilius stared at Sumia, wondering how it had come to this.

Ilius liked intelligent people. He also liked people who worked hard to become intelligent. That's why he didn't hate Sumia the first time they met.

It was four years ago that his father, the Ilegar duke, brought Sumia into their home.

He told them that she was to be raised as the daughter of a baron they controlled, since the girl was one of the few wielders of Light Magic ever discovered. His father wanted Sumia to grow into a useful pawn, so he arranged for Ilius to educate her in secret.

Sumia was never fit for a commoner's life of poverty—she was a girl able to play the part of a baron's daughter.

On top of that, she was always eager to learn and improve, making her a wonderful student.

Sumia began her studies with only basic reading and writing skills, but she passed as the perfect noblewoman after only three short years of work. This

was no doubt the result of both her talent and hard work.

But now, she's acting like this...

Ilius stared at Sumia with bittersweet emotions inside him.

She was supposed to have memorized proper etiquette as a noblewoman, but it appeared to have been shallow knowledge all along. Ilius guessed the readiness and pride that all nobles needed to carry deep in their souls wasn't something he could just teach her.

Is she acting this way because she finally won His Highness's heart?

The commoner girl had faked her way into high society and made the prince fall for her. He could hardly imagine a more extreme boost to one's self-esteem. Sumia had grown more and more arrogant, and all traces of that hard work and aspiration she'd once shown were long gone.

Even worse, Sumia had begun to harass Laetitia, her biggest threat, even more than before. She made up the lie about Laetitia pushing her down the stairs, shared it with Fritz, and forced him to end his engagement for no good reason.

And on top of it all, she'd called Laetitia out in the middle of the night after that and made ridiculous demands of the woman.

This was entirely out of line for any noblewoman. Twice now, she'd threatened the politics of their kingdom with her blunders. Sumia, along with her guardian, Ilius, was now the target of Duke Ilegar's fury.

Ilius's role was to make Sumia the crown princess and be sure not to leave any trace of their plot. To that end, he had been instructed to give Sumia more lessons on etiquette, which he was doing his best to carry out now.

He watched Sumia resist her homework, crying about how unfair it was, while on the inside, Ilius's heart was roaming in different directions.

This was the day Laetitia left for her new home.

He first met the girl two years earlier when they'd entered the academy together.

When it came time for their entrance examinations, Laetitia was the one who

took the title of top student, beating Ilius by only one point.

As he never imagined he would lose that spot, much less to a woman, Ilius took it as quite a shock. The two developed a rivalry as fellow honor students and began to drop their prim and proper facade when they interacted.

Between Laetitia's menacing smile, her title as a duke's daughter, and her beautiful yet stern amethyst eyes, the other students at the academy all did their best to avoid her.

But Ilius knew the truth.

He knew that every now and then, like when she'd solved a difficult problem or found joy in something around her, those eyes would soften and sparkle like violets in bloom.

She was a talented student, with an intellect rivaling Ilius's, who hid away those tender eyes from the world.

The more he thought of her that way, the more Ilius began to feel that Fritz wasn't good enough for Laetitia.

Fritz and Ilius were close enough that they spent time together at the academy. Ilius respected Fritz's title as the crown prince, but that was about it. The boy's personality was another matter. He completely lacked the desire to improve himself in any way and seemed only motivated by jealousy of others. It was hard to find any real appeal in the future king's character.

Fritz was an ordinary man who just happened to hold the title of prince. Laetitia deserved a better husband than him.

Those feelings might have been why Ilius hesitantly agreed to participate in his father's schemes. A year ago, his father approached him with the plan to set Sumia up with Fritz to become his future wife.

After that, Ilius spent his days busy with the work of pushing Sumia and Fritz together. The original plan was to wait a few years before spreading the news of their relationship, gather allies, and have Laetitia give up her engagement in a peaceful manner.

Now that she's not the prince's fiancée anymore, what's going to happen to

her?

Who would she marry? Was there anyone worthy of her in the kingdom?

Ilius had been trying not to think about any of it too much.

After all, Laetitia could even end up engaged to himself, the third son of the Ilegar family...and Ilius had no choice but to acknowledge that this might have been part of his calculations all along.

“...Maybe I deserved my punishment for that evil deed.”

Sumia looked at him suspiciously when she heard him murmur this.

Ilius ignored her, looking off a bit to his right—the direction of the kingdom of Wolfvarte, where Laetitia was already heading.

With their plot collapsed because of Sumia’s recklessness, Ilius and his father were now under the Gramwells’ thumb, and on top of it all, Laetitia was going to a foreign country to marry a king.

All that was left for Ilius was his duty to babysit Sumia, who had lost all sense of motivation, and his role of protecting Fritz, the empty-headed prince.

Though these consequences were the result of his own actions, he was surrounded by nothing but nuisances.

Ilius pushed up his glasses to hide the expression on his face.

Chapter 3: Campground Pot-au-feu and the Land of Fuzzy Friends

AFTER I left the capital city, my journey proceeded at a smooth pace.

Aside from having to swap horses once, after ours sprained its leg, the trip itself went without a hitch.

I had Lucian with me and two maids from home I was particularly fond of. I was also accompanied by a small platoon of royal guards to escort me to the new kingdom. It was a conservative escort party for a duke's daughter on her way to become the queen of a neighboring kingdom.

The reason for this was our hasty departure, in addition to King Glenreed's request that we arrive quietly. The mere idea of my trip turning into a whole procession seemed tiring, so this arrangement suited me better too.

At the king's demand, we journeyed without stopping longer than needed at the various inns. Unfortunately, this was necessary for my safety.

And just as we were prepared to arrive in the Wolfvarte capital in one day's time...

"Your scout caught wind of demons, so now we have to take a detour?"

I exited my carriage to listen to the royal guard commander's report.

"Yes, m'lady! The scout received this information from a village up ahead. It appears there's been a demon sighting near the main road... Do we have your permission to change course?"

The commander towered over me with a guilty look on his face. As I watched him shrink away in fear, my past life as a corporate drone came back to me and made me pity the man. I stood and thought about our best option.

Demons.

Since ancient times, these creatures have existed in our world and are said to

harbor an intense hatred for humans. They sound more like something out of a fantasy story, and even after spending seventeen years in this world, I've never once laid eyes on a real one.

There was a simple reason for that: demons have long since been driven off into a small sliver of our continent, where they remain separated from humans.

However, there are always exceptions to every rule. Unfortunately, my future home was one such exception.

The Kingdom of Wolfvarte was occasionally referred to as "the Great Shield." That name had a very regal sound to it...but the real reason for it was the demon-infested region just to the northeast of its border.

Fortunately, the Wolfvartian army was a powerful force. Demons had no reign over any territory within the actual kingdom...but from what I'd heard, it was nearly impossible to keep them out entirely. The demons would penetrate the borders and be spotted on Wolfvartian land at least once per year.

Just like animals and bugs, these demons became much more active during springtime. Another reason my marriage plans were finalized so quickly was to avoid the demon season peak.

"...Demons move in ways we can't predict. We shouldn't risk an encounter. Can't we just take the other course?"

"Yes, m'lady. We'd certainly like to do that just the same..."

"Is something troubling you?"

I tried to smile gently at the commander, who seemed hesitant to speak. I only hoped that I was successful in avoiding my overbearing, evil-looking smile.

"I just don't know where we might stay for the night. From what I've gathered, other travelers have also been forced to take shelter, so even if we take the other route, there'll be no room at the lodge for any of us."

"I see. Then could we make do with camping for tonight?"

We could take the horses and camp out beside the main road. Sleeping outdoors was something I rarely got to experience, so it actually sounded like fun to me.

“I appreciate the suggestion...but, Lady Laetitia, are you sure you’d be quite all right with that? Asking a noblewoman to rough it in the wild just doesn’t sit well with me...”

“I’ll be perfectly fine. The inns we’ve stayed at so far have all prepared exquisite meals for us, but if I’m being honest, I’m a bit tired of that kind of food. I’d like to try something new for today.”

I once again spoke of my desire to camp outside. The commander looked a little relieved to have my approval.

Well, that much was natural.

As a duke’s daughter, if I felt like it, I could wave my family’s name in the innkeepers’ faces and force them to make room for me. However, even if I gave such an order, the commander would have to be the one to carry it out. He’d be the target of all the cold stares from the displaced lodgers if he secured my spot by force.

I watched the commander’s back when he turned to leave, his posture now relaxed. It reminded me of the middle managers back at work and their visible relief whenever they avoided a disaster brought on by a careless boss.



IT was settled. Our group would camp along the roadside.

Since this was a deviation from our plans, it took us a while to prepare, and soon it was even getting late for dinner.

A few of the guards were placed in charge of cooking, and as I watched them, it didn’t look too promising.

Many of these guards escorting me to my new kingdom were the sons of noble families themselves. This was meant to ensure proper social etiquette between us. When it came to cooking, these were the kinds of people who would leave the task to the commoner troops or their servants. I doubted they’d done any kitchen work in years. But surely there had to be *some* form of outdoor meal prep as part of their military training...

It was like watching a person who’d only ever cooked during their elementary

school Home Ec classes suddenly trying to prepare a meal as an adult—not an ideal situation for anyone.

“YEOW...!”

Blood trickled down the tip of the guard’s finger, perhaps from a slip of his knife. It was the first blood shed on our otherwise peaceful journey. Seeing them struggle, I decided to intervene.

“Commander, may I help with the dinner preparations?”

“You, m’lady? I wouldn’t dream of asking you to do our job for us.”

“I’d like to try it for myself. I’m to become the queen of a kingdom where noblewomen participate in cooking, so I think it’d be a good idea to get some practice in. Isn’t it my *duty* to adapt to their culture?”

“...Very well. I wasn’t aware of the circumstances. Just please be careful not to injure yourself with any of the knives.”

“It’ll be my head if you end up getting hurt.”

Those words were written all over his face.

I sympathized, but really, I was at the end of my rope.

Every meal we’d eaten on our journey had been rich and savory. I knew that the innkeepers had pulled out all the stops in their cooking when it came to serving a duke’s daughter, but the number of spices was starting to get to me. And tomorrow, I’d be welcomed into the capital city. I had a feeling all my upcoming meals would be full of sumptuous, rich dishes. I wanted a delicious meal made to my liking, even if just for now.

One of the guards handed me a knife, and I held it in my hand for a moment to take in its weight. The handle was made of wood and had a bit of heft to it, while the blade was just like the ones I used back on Earth.

Next, I picked up vegetables from the basket and quickly took to peeling them with the knife. It started to get easier after a few attempts, and soon, I was peeling their skins with ease.

“Very well done, my lady.”

“Hehe! I’m more impressed with your work, Lucian.”

Lucian stood next to me, peeling one vegetable after the next. From what I’d heard, Lucian used to help out in the kitchen back when he lived at the orphanage, and he was an excellent assistant.

After making quick work of the vegetables, we started to dish out orders to the guards.

Our campsite meal would be a warm pot-au-feu packed full of vegetables.

I’d overheard them say the only seasoning they were going to use was salt—typical of soldiers inexperienced with cooking—so I wanted to add something special for the occasion.

“Could you please retrieve the dried meat from my luggage carriage and add it to the stew?”

“What? Are you sure? That meat’s meant for you, so it must be quite expensive.”

“It’s perfectly fine. Dried meat needs to be eaten quickly anyway, or it’ll lose its flavor. I’d like to use it all before it goes to waste.”

“...Yes, m’lady. We’re very grateful to hear you’ll share such a valuable ingredient with us.”

The commander bowed his head. Behind him, I saw the faces of the other guards light up.

After a full day of travel, riding their horses while clad in iron suits, it was only natural that they’d worked up a large appetite. Since we’d suddenly changed plans and decided to camp out, they’d had no time to prepare any meat for dinner either.

But my escort couldn’t hide their delight at this turn of events—they would be able to have meat tonight after all.

I knew I’d have to take great care with it so as not to let them down.

All the meat was specially prepared for me specifically, and that meant it was, once again, doused in spices and seasonings. But I decided a pot-au-feu would be a good opportunity to put it to use.

That is, I felt that its rich flavor might turn out better when diluted with water.

I filled the pot with water and added one strip of meat as a test.

Once the liquid came to a simmer and the meat became more tender, the mouthwatering scent of spices started to reach our noses.

“Mmm! It tastes as good as it smells.”

I scooped up some broth with a ladle and took a sip. My tongue was greeted by the savory flavor of the meat.

Satisfied with the taste, it was now time for me to complete the stew.

I added the onions, potatoes, and carrots into the pot and let the contents reach a good simmer.

The vegetables all started to slowly change color. I cut up the rest of the dried meat and added it to the pot. Finally, after letting it simmer for a while, I scooped up a spoonful to taste, then added a bit more salt, and then it was ready.

“It’s delicious...!”

“You can still taste the nice seasoning from the meat!”

“I’d have never thought you could make food this good over a campfire...”

The guards took sip after sip of the piping-hot stew. I was pleased to see that they liked the meal.

Finally, I joined them, putting my lips to the fragrant bowl of pot-au-feu.

“So warm...”

The amber soup entered my mouth and immediately filled it with the hearty taste of broth. The onions were just slightly sweet, while the other vegetables dissolved in my mouth, and the heavily seasoned meat had been watered down enough to make for a nice accent.

I felt relief flood my body as the pot-au-feu warmed me from the inside out. Our party feasted as nighttime fell upon the spring campgrounds.



THE next morning, we heated up the leftover pot-au-feu and ate it with bread before heading out early.

When we finally arrived in the capital city, I was greeted by an extravagant carriage meant for me. The sides and ceiling of the passenger car were completely open, allowing me to see the world around me. It was unlike any carriage I'd ever been in.

"Wow..."

It was my first look at the Wolfvarte capital.

The streets were lined with rows of white houses, framed with dark wood and topped by slanted roofs. On each side of the road, the people of Wolfvarte were gathered to catch a glimpse of my face on the way to the castle.

Human. Human. Human. Beastfolk, and then an animal.

I spotted a young girl with droopy, doglike ears, alongside an actual dog with ears of the same shape. Both of them had their eyes fixed on me.

Beastfolk in this world have the same faces, hands, and feet as humans. They also possess animal ears and tails.

Though they vary in appearance, beastfolk, at the end of the day, still walk on two legs like everyone else. They can't just transform into actual animals or anything like that, from what I've heard. Beastfolk only retain certain features of those animals. Werewolves transforming into hounds under the light of the full moon are nothing but fairy tales in our world.

With these thoughts, I tried waving to the beast girl as I passed, but she flinched and turned red in response.

The dog sensed her sudden distress and began to lick the back of the girl's hand. I saw her turn to stroke the dog's head in return, realizing his concern for her.

The beast girl and the big dog played together.

They make such a cute pair.

I quietly smiled to myself over their obvious bond, then turned to survey my surroundings.

The kingdom was full of pointy-roofed houses, beastfolk residents, and demons lurking along its borders. Everything about it felt like a fairy tale, but this place was to become my new home.

Something came to mind as I continued down the capital streets in my open carriage.

Most of the crowd consisted of just normal humans. There were hardly any beastfolk like the dog-eared girl I'd seen earlier, even though they were supposed to make up just under half of Wolfvarte's population and nearly a third in the capital city alone.

And yet, almost every spectator who'd come to see my arrival appeared to be human.

There wasn't even a single beastfolk for every ten humans I saw.

...Hmm.

I interpreted it as a sign of the troubled relationship between humans and beastfolk.

While it wasn't as severe as in my homeland, there was tension between the two races even here.

The Silver Wolf King whom I was about to marry had previously rejected four candidates to be his wife, two of which were human, and two were beastfolk. I imagined that to the other beastfolk of the kingdom, I was the human who came in and broke the tie. Perhaps that was enough of a disappointment to dissuade them from coming out to welcome me.

As I toyed with this idea, the walls of the royal castle suddenly came into view.

My carriage passed through the outer gates.

Scattered buildings, each a royal villa by the looks of them, were surrounded by small patches of forest.

Wolfvarte's royal castle was made up of two areas separated by border walls.

The outer region contained a spacious area of open land, and within the inner walls was the king's main residential palace.

We drew closer, and there they were—the towering walls of the inner castle. It was the final destination of my journey.

The massive white stone structure stood out vividly against the sea of green trees that surrounded it.

The many castle spires loomed above me, as if to beckon me inside.



ALMOST as soon as I made it into the main castle, I was whisked away and undressed by my maids. They swiftly helped me freshen up and change into my next outfit.

We'd arrived at the castle later than planned due to the detour, and before I had my first meeting with His Majesty, I needed to clean myself up the best I could.

The maids dusted my skin with pearl powder and painted my lips red. Once they finished styling my hair, it was already time to head straight to where the king was waiting for me.

I walked briskly, trying to be as quick as possible while still maintaining an elegant gait. The one thing I couldn't do was look flustered.

As I took in the sights of this kingdom's castle, I thought about King Glenreed, the man I was about to meet.

His Majesty was currently twenty-three years old. That was slightly older than myself, at seventeen, but such a gap wasn't abnormal when it came to political marriages.

King Glenreed was known for both his brilliance and his hatred of women. My only duty was to become a placeholder queen. I had no intention of trying to force him to take to me, but even so, I was still going to be his wife. I hoped the two of us could be on friendly terms, at the very least.

Just as I was entertaining such ideas...

The door before me opened, and there he was. I was standing face-to-face with the king.

“.....”

Silence.

Holding my tongue was just natural etiquette on my part, but at the same time, I was also at a loss for words.

A young man with silver hair sat before me on his throne.

His eyes were crystalline and blue-green like a winter lake. His masculine yet refined features looked as if they'd been carved from ice. He had a cold, beautiful face that was too striking to ever forget.

I'd heard the king hated women, but now, seeing him in person, I couldn't help but imagine his good looks had gotten him into all kinds of unwanted trouble with the ladies—as rude a thought as that was.

I bowed my head politely to greet him. When I raised it, I thought I briefly saw his handsome lips move.

“...What a funny smell.”

...What?

Wait, what did he just say to me?

It was the quietest of whispers, but I couldn't just pretend I hadn't heard it.

Am I wrong, or were you looking at me when you said that, Your Majesty?

I'd just finished freshening myself up—with the help of my maids—and was even wearing perfume to give my body a nice scent. Was it really such a “funny smell”...?

Or maybe I still smelled like the dried meat and spices I prepared the night before? That seemed extremely unlikely, but what else could he have meant with that comment?

I set aside my confusion to give the king a pleasant smile, waiting for him to speak again. That moment was the ultimate display of my years of royal training.



“You’re Laetitia Gramwell, I presume?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It’s an honor to meet you.”

I took hold of my dress and curtsied before him. The king’s blue eyes slimmed into an unreadable expression.

“I’m sure you’re tired from your long journey. You’ll have your own villa to live in where you can take some time to rest.”

“I appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

“Unfortunately, I won’t be able to see very much of you, but I’d like to help you be as comfortable here as I can. You should get going to the villa to see if there’s anything you’ll need.”

His Majesty shared words of kindness with me.

And yet, they were nothing but superficial.

“I’m giving you a house, so go take your place and don’t bother me again.”

His intentions were clear. I would be treated as nothing more than the figurehead queen that I was.



ONCE Laetitia left for the villa, Glenreed stayed on his throne and took some time to think.

Laetitia had once been the fiancée of her kingdom’s crown prince, but after that man had rejected and banished her, she was now Glenreed’s wife.

Glenreed was worried about what kind of woman she’d turn out to be, but once she accepted her orders to stay put in the villa without complaint, he felt a bit of relief. Laetitia appeared to be a well-trained duchess, with flawless, elegant conduct. However...

Just what was that smell...?

It certainly wasn’t foul. It wasn’t unpleasant at all.

But there was no doubt in his mind that Laetitia gave off a strange scent.

Maybe it was because she hailed from a foreign land?

Or perhaps it had something to do with the strong magic he'd heard she possessed?

Glenreed didn't know what that smell was, but as long as she was going to hold the title of queen, he couldn't just ignore her forever. He also knew well from experience that his "nose" had a habit of leading him into trouble.

I want to investigate her, but I don't know how...

He had many skilled servants at his disposal, but when it came to matters of his nose, almost no one would know what to do.

Of course, he could always take matters into his own hands.

Glenreed sat atop his throne and began to hatch a new plan.



I excused myself from the throne room and left the castle in my carriage.

I was headed toward my new home.

Though it was still technically a part of the castle, that was only because the surrounding grounds were so spacious. The area inside the outer walls was big enough to hold an average-sized village on its own.

My carriage rattled and swayed from side to side as we traveled. I occupied my mind by listening to the sound of the horses' hooves.

We've been driving for so long. We're still not at the house yet?

"This is pretty far from the main palace..."

Outside my window was a sea of dark evergreen trees. To all appearances, it looked exactly like I'd been cast out into the middle of a vast forest, even though I was actually still within the castle walls. It appeared we'd made our way to a small forest road in the sprawling castle property.

I felt the carriage start to slow until we came to a quiet stop.

Lucian took my hand and gently helped me exit the carriage.

"This is my villa..."

My new home, where I would live as the queen of Wolfvarte, stood before

me. However...

As far as first impressions went, it felt more like a house hidden away in the forest than a royal villa. And it wasn't just a "house" either. Calling it "deserted lodgings" would be more appropriate. The walls were formed with white plaster and dark wooden frames, all nestled underneath a reddish-brown roof.

It was certainly charming, but in the end, this house was nothing more than a simple two-story building. You wouldn't think of it as part of a palace at all.

Shouldn't a royal home at least have a fountain out front?

There was a decent front yard, but directly behind the building itself was the edge of the forest.

As for size, the house where I'd spent my life as a duke's daughter was more than twice as big as this one.

It was still significantly larger than the average house in this world, and larger than the home my previous-life family lived in too, of course, but it was still a whole lot smaller than I had been imagining.

"Your Majesty, we are honored to receive you. All the staff here sincerely welcome you to your new home."

The servants stood in a line in front of the house, waiting for my arrival.

One man seemed to speak for the rest of them. He bowed deeply as he greeted me.

As he leaned forward, I had a clear view of two soft, fuzzy ears sprouting from his head.

He wasn't the only beastfolk among the crowd. I could see many other servants with large animal ears of their own.

One of the maids even had triangular ears like a cat's. She was a young girl with a slim tail and was dressed in a maid's uniform.

Many *otaku* in my previous life would buckle at the very thought of a cat maid, and in this world, they turned out to be as real as anything else.

"Please follow me and allow me to show you around the house."

The dog-eared head servant led me inside the villa.

He wore a proper servant's uniform and had a neatly trimmed, dark-brown mustache. For a middle-aged man, he looked like quite a fancy gentleman... And there atop his head was a pair of floppy dog ears, with a bushy tail down below.

Yeah, that's pretty much the last thing you'd expect to see.

The dog-eared man, a.k.a. Borgan, smoothly explained aspects of the house as he led me around. He took each step with perfect pacing and offered me descriptions of every room, including their purpose.

As I'd thought from the outside, the house didn't have many rooms inside it. It was a snug little building.

Too much space would require a pointless amount of upkeep, so actually, I appreciated the size. When I heard I would be staying in a royal villa, I'd been preparing myself to see a grand mansion. This was a bit of a relief. Maybe it was my past-life experience that made me feel a bit unnerved by giant manors like the one I grew up in.

When the general tour was over, I had nothing left on my schedule.

"Your long journey and the audience with His Majesty must have left you exhausted," Borgan said to me, and he agreed to leave the rest of the introductions and details for tomorrow.

"I'm so tired...", I said with a sigh.

I flopped myself down onto my new bed, thankful that no one was around to see me in this state.

This was my first time being alone in days.

The soft bed wrapped my body in a comfortable embrace.

Underneath me, the sheets felt completely smooth and clean. The house itself seemed a bit run-down with age, but I had no complaints about any of the furniture and accessories inside it.

King Glenreed's blunt manner had taken me by surprise earlier...but overall, he seemed polite enough, if a bit distant, which was a relief.

Though, politeness was the very least I should expect as the queen, I supposed...

After I'd regained my memories, my ex-fiancé, Fritz, the dim-witted Elltorian crown prince, was the first member of royalty I shared interactions with. Perhaps I was still on guard after that whole experience.

"King Glenreed, huh...?"

When I closed my eyes, his face appeared vividly in my mind.

Those green eyes were tinged with blue—the same color of an icy lake.

His silver hair glimmered in the light.

The way his lips moved as he commented on a "funny smell."

"...Just what did he mean by that?"

If I really did hear him correctly, I hadn't the slightest clue how to interpret that statement.

I gave myself a sniff, just to be sure, but I couldn't smell any cooking spices on my skin or clothes. All I could make out was the faint floral scent of the perfume my maids had prepared for me. It was very pleasant. I appreciated their smart choice.

As far as I knew, I didn't have much body odor at all, but maybe His Majesty wasn't referring to any one smell of mine.

"Is it just my natural scent he doesn't like? And that's why he sent me here?"

Even though it was my own theory, it was a little depressing to think about...

What if I had some kind of weird anti-pheromone he could smell? If I was unacceptable to His Majesty on a biological level, there was nothing I could do to fix it.

Sure, I was just a figurehead queen, but it seemed there were already more bumps in the road than I'd expected.

"...Thinking about that now won't do me any good."

I forced myself to sit up.

I'd been granted a free day to use to my own liking, and even though I was merely a placeholder, being queen still might keep me busy in the future. As much as I wanted to laze around in bed all day, the weather was nice and sunny.

I decided to step out and have a look at the surroundings.

Lucian, who had been standing outside the bedroom, followed me to the yard.

The early spring sunlight poured down from above. It was the perfect weather for a walk.

I took in the beautiful blooming flowers in the front yard, enjoying some calming time to myself.

Suddenly, a nearby shrub started to rustle, and a large shadow jumped out in front of me.

"...A wolf?"

Its ears perked up. The beast's fur was gray and its tail stood at attention.

The wolf's brown eyes, shining in the sunlight, were visible from where I stood.

"Your Majesty, just to be safe, I think you sh—"

Lucian was interrupted by a swarm of shadows emerging from the trees.

Each wolf was the size of a large dog, with sharp claws and a mix of gray and brown fur.

"What's going on...?"

The wolves didn't try to attack me—they just stood at a distance and stared straight at us.

They glared at me, seeming to be on guard...

Something about them reminded me of Jiro, my beloved dog from the life I lived before. With their perky ears and cute snouts, it was hard to call them anything but an adorable pack of fuzzy creatures.

"They don't appear hostile... What should we do, my queen?"

“Right... They probably—”

“HEEEY!! Knock it off!! You guys can’t just go runnin’ off whenever you want!!”

Suddenly, a boy came dashing and shouting from the direction the wolves had emerged from. The creatures seemed to stand up straighter when they heard him yell.

The boy had curly white hair, and he was beastfolk too. His animal ears perked up from behind his curls, and just when he spotted us...

“EEEEEEEEEEEEK!!” he screamed at the sight.

Was I mistaken, or did I not just see this kid yelling fearlessly at a pack of wolves?

I started to doubt my own eyes, now that he’d transformed so dramatically.

The white-haired beastfolk boy looked to be about my age.

His face twitched as he stared at Lucian and me. I could see his eyes darting all over the place behind his long bangs.

The wolves wagged their tails as they trotted up to the frightened boy.

“What’s wrong?”

“Are you scared of that lady?”

“Did she startle you? Is that it?”

The way the animals looked back and forth between the two of us, I could almost hear their questions for their apparent master.

“Um, excuse me...”

“Y-Yes?!”

The boy gave an instant response when I spoke.

His rigid stance hadn’t changed, but he at least appeared able to speak now.

“My name is Laetitia. I’ve come to this kingdom as King Glenreed’s wife, and I moved into the villa today. May I ask for your name and what you do here?”

“...Of course!! My name’s Edgar, a-and I take care of the *wooolfs*!!”

He tripped on his words. And so noticeably, too.

Edgar heard his own mistake. Both his ears and tail seemed to sink and deflate.

By the look on his face, he was obviously very upset. At the same time, I was learning that the ears and tails of beastfolk conveyed their emotions too.

“You’re a wolfkeeper? I’ve heard about you. That’s quite impressive work.” I continued on with the conversation, pretending I hadn’t heard his mistake.

The wolfkeeper.

The people of the Kingdom of Wolfvarte believe the royal family’s ancestors were wolf spirits. Each generation of royalty keeps wolves themselves, perhaps because of that legend.

I’d also learned that the expansive land surrounding the palace was originally used to keep and breed wild wolves.

But instead of the busy kings, it was wolfkeepers like Edgar who looked after the packs on a daily basis. These trained wolves were incredible specimens, from what I’d heard, possessing both sharp fangs and intense loyalty toward humans. Indeed, the wolves around us now made no attempt to bite us, and they seemed to follow Edgar’s every command.

“I see you have over ten wolves there. You can really control all of them?”

“Y-Yes!! W-Wait, no! I’m not the only wolfkeeper, it’s just my turn to take them out on a walk today!”

“Oh, I see. So you usually take them for walks in front of this house, and today you happened to run into me along the way?”

“I’m very sorry to have disturbed you!!”

Edgar shoved his head down in apology.

I could tell he was being incredibly sincere, and yet...

“What are you up to?”

“Why’re you bowing your head like that?”

The wolves pushed their noses up toward Edgar, making for a much less

serious scene.

“...Please lift your head. I was a bit startled at first, yes, but you haven’t disturbed me at all. I’m very pleased to see the wolves up close after hearing tales of them. They’re very beautiful and majestic—”

“I agree!!” shouted Edgar, whipping his head back up. “Their ears point straight toward the sky! Their wet noses are always wiggling and moving! I could watch them forever!” Edgar enthused.

I could tell he was the type of person to perk right up when the subject of conversation was something he loved. However, when he looked back at me, the passion faded from his voice all at once.

“I-I’m sorry... That was rude of me. We’ve only just met.”

His beast ears drooped.

“Don’t worry about that. I love wolves too, so I understand how you feel.”

Well, I’m more of a dog lover than just a wolf lover.

When it came to Jiro, my beloved pet in my past life, I could go on for hours about how perfect he was.

“You really...love wolves...? It’s not that I don’t believe you, it’s just...unusual.”

“Unusual? You think so?”

“Y-Yes. I just...think it’s not common. Wolves are carnivores, after all, so it’s strange you’re not scared of them. These guys would never attack a human unless they were ordered to, of course... But most people, especially those who aren’t native to this kingdom, are too scared of wolves to go near them...”

Edgar stared at me timidly.

“So you’re different, then. If you weren’t, the wolves would be more upset... Wolves are sometimes like mirrors for people, you see. If they can tell you’re scared of them, then they’ll get scared too...”

He let out a quiet chuckle as he gently stroked the head of one wolf.

“I’m...very sorry I startled a nice lady such as yourself. I’ll take the wolves on a different route from now on, so there’s no need to worry.”

“...A different route?”

They’re not going to pass by the house anymore?

...I can’t let that happen.

“Could I ask you not to do that? It’s a rare opportunity to get to see the royal wolves up close. If possible, I’d like you to keep bringing the wolves out this way, whenever you have time.”

“A-Are you sure...? I’d be glad to keep them on their usual route, but I don’t want to bother you.”

“Well, it hasn’t caused any trouble so far, has it? Your wolves appear very well trained. As long as they don’t damage anything in the yard, I can’t imagine it will be any kind of problem for me.”

“...Th-Thank you very much!!”

Edgar’s tail flicked happily from side to side.

For someone who struggled to get his words out, this gesture conveyed his feelings more than anything else had so far.

The wolves would get to keep their favorite walking route, and I would get to regularly see them up close.

It was a win-win situation. I’d now have an opportunity to warm my soul every now and then.

...Maybe, if I gained their trust, I’d even get to pet them as much as I wanted.

With that thought, my heart began to long for the feeling of their fur in my hands.



“**HUFF** huff pant So...bored... huff huff”

Greetings.

I’m Laetitia, the new figurehead queen of this kingdom.

...What exactly am I doing?

Why, I’m killing time and working on self-improvement at the same time.

Seventeen years of life as a duke's daughter, and there was still a stubborn flaw of mine that remained.

To put it simply, my body was almost impressively weak when it came to muscle strength. We didn't have certain conveniences like cars in this world, but as a noblewoman, I'd always been surrounded by servants and maids.

Thanks to that, I rarely had to do any manual labor, but that also meant my body was quite frail. My experience with things like dancing and horseback riding had all been limited to my education. I had no real interest in either subject.

As for magic, my brothers made sure I was well trained in those arts, but that was by no means a physical activity.

At the very least...I did probably have decent core and back muscles, since those were necessary for proper posture, but other than that, my arms and legs were essentially just limp bean sprouts.

Even when I made that ice cream, I felt the soreness reach my muscles that very night.

It was thanks to the whisk I'd made with my magic.

Perfection in the kitchen demands a certain amount of physical strength. I felt it all the more in this world, with its lack of electric appliances and cooking utensils. Cooking requires a lot of physical exertion, even though magic does help take a bit of the edge off, but I decided it would still be a good idea to build up strength. And so, I stood in my room with shiny metal dumbbells in each hand.

That's right—a queen working out with dumbbells.

It felt strange to me too. But they were definitely handy when it came to building muscle strength.

The dumbbells also had another purpose—they were a way to get a bit of magic practice in at the same time.

Earth Magic—"transmutation."

This way of altering the shape of metals is pretty handy, once you get the

hang of it.

For practice, I decided to make the dumbbells I used in my past life while dieting. It was a decent training exercise overall—I worked on making them different weights, two at a time for each hand, and even managed to create the right shapes.

Lately, I'd been busying myself with these workouts, using my shiny new dumbbells each time.

"huff huff pant huff Today...makes... huff...ten...already...huff"

It was my tenth day in the royal villa.

My new husband, King Glenreed, hadn't once come to visit me.

I knew that His Majesty was a very busy man, but at this point, he appeared to just be neglecting me entirely. So, without any political role to fulfill, I was forced to spend the entirety of my days in the villa.

Abandoned in the forest villa, ignored by my husband...

It seemed like a harsh welcome to the kingdom, but right now, I was loving my new life. It was the perfect life of leisure. I didn't have a care in the world.

Thinking back, I was a busy office worker in my past life, and then after reincarnating, I lived as a duke's daughter. I was already busy with my regular studies, but during the last few years, the addition of training to be a royal took up every spare moment.

Compared with that, my current life was paradise.

There was no point in lamenting my loveless marriage. I was grateful to His Majesty for granting me a life of freedom.

"The water here is delicious...", I said with a sigh after gulping down a cold glass of lemon water following my workout.

It was the most blissful of moments. I lived for that sensation.

Having quenched my thirst splendidly, I opened my closet doors to put the dumbbells away.

I had left a whisk and dumbbells of different weights inside one of the

drawers. The metal of the utensil was cold, and the shape familiar against my hand.

“This whisk looks like it’ll still last for a while...”

I plucked at the wires to test it, and they sprung right back into place.

The motion wasn’t enough to disturb the shape even slightly.

This particular whisk was the one I made over a month ago, back at my home in Elltoria.

Considering most transmuted items lost their shape within ten days, this was an extraordinary amount of time for it to have survived.

“Hmm... This feels like cheating...?”

It would certainly be convenient for me if I could avoid remaking my tools each time. I didn’t yet understand why it wasn’t breaking...but it probably had something to do with my past-life memories returning to me.

The life span of transmuted items is said to be largely influenced by the caster’s use of imagination. The more familiar one is with the item they’re crafting, the more durable it will stay over a longer period of time.

However, these are still objects crafted with magic. No matter how close you get to the original appearance, and no matter how vivid the image is in your mind, you won’t be able to produce anything that lasts longer than ten days...or so it’s believed. But for some reason, my whisk had survived for over a month, and it showed no sign of breaking down yet.

“Maybe...it’s because I know about iron? I know about atoms and protons and even iron production...”

It wasn’t much knowledge to boast of—just memories from middle school science class and a few other tidbits I happened to know.

But maybe that meant I knew more about “iron” than anyone else in this entire world. Because magic existed here, I wasn’t even sure if we abided by the same laws of physics as Earth did, but with my new unbreakable whisk, it did make some sense to me.

“Your Majesty, it’s just about time for Edgar’s arrival. Are you all ready?”

“Thank you, Lucian. I’ll be right there.”

I put the whisk back in its drawer, stripped off my sweaty undergarments, and changed into a dress and apron.

The dress was cute, not too heavy, and easy to clean as well.

It was a modest outfit for the queen of a kingdom, but I was saving the lavish dresses for my public appearances. If I was to be left here alone in my villa, I wanted to prioritize comfort above all else.

I quickly finished getting changed without the help of a maid, then went downstairs and out into the front yard.

My feet felt light and my heart was joyful.

Since I’d been interacting with Edgar’s wolves every day, they were starting to become fond of me.

“Y-Your Majesty...it’s nice to see you again.”

“Good afternoon, Edgar. I’m glad to see you too.”

I greeted Edgar with a smile. He blushed and stiffened in place.

Edgar’s beet-red face had already become a familiar sight to me. The boy appeared to struggle with human interactions. He was always on edge whenever he had to make conversation with Lucian or me.

But when it was time to give commands to the wolves, he was like a different person—brave and confident.

That strange boy had once again shown up in my front yard with ten or so wolves in tow.

Some went to sniff the newly tended flower beds. Others ran across the grass in pursuit of butterflies. But one wolf came up to me and nuzzled its head against my body.

“Good boy. You came to see me, didn’t you?”

I stroked the wolf’s head, and he stared up at me as if he was waiting for something.

Knowing exactly what he wanted, I reached into my dress pocket.

“There’s no rush, now. I’ll have you feeling much better, okay?”

“Woof!!”

I laid a handkerchief on the ground and sat on it. The wolf approached me from the side.

In my hand, I held a transmuted metal brush.

It looked like what we called a “slicker brush” back on Earth—a grooming device for long-haired dogs.

I used to use one of these to groom Jiro whenever I was at my parents’ house in my past life. The only difference now was the material of the handle. As for the metal wires that made up the actual head of the brush, well, I was confident I’d done a good job reproducing them accurately.

“Aroooooooooo!”

The wolf let out a pleased cry and closed his eyes when he felt the slicker brush run through his fur. I dragged it carefully across his body, being careful not to hurt his skin as I undid the knots in his gray and white coat.

The spring days were growing steadily warmer.

Each of the wolves appeared to be shedding their winter coat, leaving their skin itchy as a result. But the slicker brush gave their bodies the relief they craved. When the wolves learned this, they started coming to me for grooming.

“I think the wolves really like that... Your Majesty, you’ve been doing such a g-great job with them. I really respect that!”

Edgar was stumbling on his words like usual, but his fascinated stare was enough to express his sincere interest.

“It’s all thanks to this brush. I saw a diagram for something like this in a book I read back home, so I decided to give it a shot with my magic.”

“That’s amazing...”

“Thank you. Would you like to give the other one a try?”

“R-Really?! I’m allowed to use such a rare brush?!”

Edgar was brimming with excitement.

As the keeper of the wolves, Edgar had much more love and curiosity for the creatures than most.

“It’s all right. I made these from scrap metal, so they’re not particularly valuable. I’m just not sure how durable they are, so they might not last very long... Is that okay?”

He nodded vigorously. The boy’s amber eyes were sparkling with delight.

I handed Edgar the other slicker brush I’d made, and he carefully took hold of it like it was a sacred artifact. Quietly, he trembled in awe.

“Whooooa! It’s the brush of the gods...!”

“Ahaha. I’m not sure I’d go that far. Do you know how to use it?”

“Yes!! I-I can do it, Your Majesty! I’ve been watching you for days now! Ah, I mean, n-not in a weird way... Um, just the brushings...!”

“I know, I know. Go gently with it at first, okay? Some wolves might respond to it differently, so it’s best to be careful.”

Since these slicker brushes were made of metal wires, some dogs didn’t seem to like how it felt. Fortunately, all the wolves around us appeared to love their brushings, just like Jiro did. I only wanted Edgar to be extra careful. It was best to go slow with the brush at first to not scare or hurt any of the wolves.

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty! I understand!”

He held the brush and looked around at each of the animals until one wolf approached him.

Calmly, he stroked the wolf’s fur with his hand and had the animal sit before him, then placed the brush against the beast’s coat.

Edgar’s movements were timid at first, but he seemed to get the hang of it in no time, and soon he was gliding the brush through the fur with ease. The wolf seemed pleased as well.

That’s why he’s the wolfkeeper, after all.

“Well done. You sure picked that up quick. Oh, look at that! This wolf seems so happy, now that its fur is smooth.”

“Hehehe!” Edgar responded with a happy laugh of his own, breaking into a delighted smile.

Though it was hard to tell with his usual timid demeanor, Edgar was actually rather good-looking when he smiled.

“This brush was so strange to me at first, but it’s actually really easy to use...!”

He was eager to praise the handiness of the slicker brushes.

Edgar was still hesitant to make eye contact with me, but judging by the full sentences he was now able to speak, he appeared to be a bit more comfortable in my presence.

“And it’s so good at getting out tangles. This is going to be so convenient...!” He sent the brush gliding through the wolf’s fur as he spoke.

Naturally, as the wolfkeeper, Edgar already had many brushes to deal with their summer shedding.

They came in different sizes, but those brushes were best used on other beasts. They were made with natural materials, and although they weren’t completely unsuitable for grooming wolves, one problem was how the fur would clump on the bristles, making them hard to use. In comparison, my slicker brushes had smooth metal combs that made for much easier grooming.

For Edgar, who looked after the wolves, that variation made a big difference.

He continued to brush the wolves that were now lining up around him. He had a big smile on his face.

While enjoying this pleasant scene, I continued to comb the fur of the wolf at my side.

“Hrrrm...?”

“Oh my. What’s the matter?”

The wolf squirmed under the slicker brush, letting out a little groan.

Was I brushing him too hard?

Worried, I looked down at the animal’s face, only to find that he was staring off toward the nearby tree line.

The other wolves fell still and turned to stare in the same direction. They sat in the grass, noses fixed on the tree line, their ears perked forward, and their front paws perfectly aligned. It was just like a row of servants standing at attention to welcome their master home.

“Whoa...”

The trees rustled, breaking the silence of the garden, and a single wolf came into view.

The creature had silver fur that glistened under the light of the sun.

Underneath that beautiful coat was a wolf bigger than the rest of the pack. He even looked stronger, too.

The wolf approached the front yard, taking in his surroundings. His eyes were the color of a winter lake, and something about them gave off an atmosphere of pride and intelligence.

He squinted his blue-green eyes at me, never breaking eye contact as he approached.

“What’s the m— Whoa?!”

I suddenly found myself face-to-face with the silver wolf. He began to sniff at me curiously.

Left, right, front, and back—the creature took in my scent from all angles, as if desperately trying to figure something out.

“Just what is that smell? It’s so strange!”

The way the wolf cocked his head at me, I could practically hear him muttering those words.

In fact, it was such a human gesture coming from what was essentially a giant dog, I couldn’t help but find it amusing.

“Ahaha! What’s the matter? Is my scent that interesting to you? You’re just like King Glenreed!”

“King Glenreed.”

I was pretty sure that just for a moment, I saw the wolf stiffen at the sound of

that name. On the one hand, he was an animal, but on the other, he'd been raised by humans. Perhaps he recognized the king's name.

"Edgar, His Majesty sure is impressive, no? Even the wolves seem to fear his name. Sure, he may be the king, but don't you think that's a bit much?" I said to Edgar in jest.

"Stay away from him!!"

"?!"

Edgar grabbed my shoulders and whisked me off the ground.

For a moment, I was shocked by his strength. When I looked up at him, his face was icy cold.

"That wolf's not one of mine!!"

"What?"

A wild wolf? Within the castle walls?

I froze in bewilderment.

Edgar was facing the wolf, trying to contain his fear.

Lucian stood at the ready.

The silver wolf glared back at us.

At that moment, the tension-filled silence was once again broken by the sound of rustling trees.

"Hehehe! There's no need to be so nervous. I guarantee that silver wolf won't be any trouble to you."

"Lord Melvin?!"

I could feel some of the distress leave Edgar's body.

A handsome young man with golden hair and light-blue eyes had emerged from the forest. This was none other than Melvin.

His work as an aide to the king should have been keeping him more than occupied. So why was he here?

"Good afternoon, Lord Melvin. What brings you all the way out here?" I

asked.

“I was just waiting on this here wolf. I apologize if he frightened you.”

“...Whose wolf is he, exactly? Edgar didn’t recognize him either...”

“He’s a bit of a special case. Did you see the color of his eyes?”

“They are a beautiful bluish green. I haven’t seen any other wolves with eyes like his...”

The wolf I had just been brushing was still sitting at my side, looking up at me with amber eyes that lightened in the rays of the sun.

The other wolves’ eyes were varying shades of brown too.

“Indeed! This silver wolf just so happened to be born with blue-green eyes. On top of that, in this kingdom, we view wolves as symbols of our monarchy, and many members of the royal family possess those same blue-green eyes. That has caused the silver wolf to be seen as an object of worship...and he was nearly kidnapped by some wretched soul.”

“...That’s terrible. This poor boy must have been through a lot.”

They’d tried to take the wolf for themselves just because of his unusual appearance. It was a cruel tale.

“Fortunately, the kidnapping was unsuccessful... But the whole ordeal took its toll on him, and now it’s not so easy for him to warm up to people anymore. For everyone’s safety, I’ve been keeping him separate from the other wolves and taking care of him on my own.”

Edgar seemed to accept this explanation. He and I were both seventeen years old. He’d told me it was only a year ago that he first became a wolfkeeper.

“Thank you for the information, Melvin. I’m glad to know this silver wolf’s history...but will he be okay interacting with us?”

“Actually, it’s perfect. Wolves are pack animals, so I brought him here today in the hope of seeing him interact with other wolves and humans. He might show up here again in the future, so please give him lots of love and tr— Ow, ow, ow!!”

"I don't want anyone's love!!" the wolf seemed to say as it butted its head against Melvin.

With an annoyed snort, the silver wolf kept his eyes fixed on me.

"Oh... Would you...like a closer look?" I asked.

I was still holding the slicker brush in my right hand.

I was surprised by how intelligent this wolf appeared to be. The sight of the unfamiliar tool might have piqued his interest.

"Melvin, is it okay to touch him?"

"He doesn't like to be pet, but I think he'll let you brush him. He's used to being groomed by other people."

"...Is that so?"

He doesn't like to be directly touched, but it's okay as long as I use a tool?

The distinction didn't really make sense to me, but Melvin knew this silver wolf best, and I had no reason to doubt him.

I was a bit disappointed that I couldn't pet that beautiful silver fur with my hands, but I decided to offer a nice brushing as a way of introducing myself instead.

Slowly, I glided the brush through his coat, careful not to hurt his skin. Little by little, his silver fur grew even shinier than before.

I stared at the lovely sight and thought about what a strange creature he was.



LATER that day.

Within the palace, inside the king's office...

"Damn it... What's gotten into me? The other wolves made the brush look so good, I just couldn't resist giving it a try..."

There stood the Wolfvartian king, his silver locks a bit shinier than usual, grumbling these complaints to himself.

Chapter 4: Chiffon Cake and the Troubled Chef

ONCE the silver wolf appeared satisfied with his brushing, he and Melvin returned to the forest, out of our sight. After watching them leave, Edgar left with his wolves as well, so I decided to return home with Lucian.

When I entered through the front door, one of the beastfolk maids stood in waiting.

“I’ve come to bring you a message from the kitchen, Your Majesty,” said Krona, the black-haired maid, as she bowed.

The maid’s bushy triangular ears were standing at attention on either side of her bonnet. Her eyes were slim and golden, with slender feline pupils. She was the ultimate black-cat maid.

“The kitchen? Does that mean...”

“They’ve said that starting today, you’re welcome to use the kitchen at any point before dinner preparations.”

Yes!

I struck a victory pose in my heart. Needing to change out of my fur-ridden clothes, I headed upstairs to my bedroom, only to find that a clean apron and dress had already been laid out for me.

My maids were as quick on their toes as ever. Once I changed clothes, Krona approached me.

“Your Majesty, might I style your hair for you?”

“Certainly. I’ll leave it in your hands for today.”

Krona reached her slim fingers toward the back of my head. It was a bit ticklish, but the more I watched her work, the more braids I saw form in my hair, until it was all pulled together in the back.

“Once again, you’ve impressed me with your hairdressing skills.”

“...Your hair is perfect for styling, Your Majesty.”

Her face was as stony as ever, even as she praised me, but I did catch the tip of her tail start to twitch just slightly. She seemed to be pleased as well.

Krona had braided the hair on both sides of my head, then tied the back up with red and white ribbons. The arrangement felt light and easy to move with, while also giving my hair an eye-catching appearance.

I stood up, ready to give her my thanks, when I noticed the girl was staring right at me.

“What is it, Krona?”

“Your Majesty, you’re going to start making sweets in the kitchen, aren’t you?”

“That’s my plan, yes. Would you like to join me and be my taste tester?”

“Absolutely!!”

Her response was instantaneous.

Krona must have had a weak spot for sweets, I determined.

Boy, can I relate to that.

“Hehe! I did it...! Now I get all the treats I want!” she quietly cheered to herself.

Krona seemed to have an unpredictable personality, much like an actual cat.

You might question if maids should be unpredictable, but Krona was fantastic at her job.

She understood the proper boundaries between a master and servant, and she always treated me with the utmost respect too. The other maids were somewhat withdrawn around me, since I was a foreigner in their kingdom, and as a result, it was easier for me to rely on Krona’s help all the more.

I also had my own trusted maids from back home, but it didn’t seem right to only work with people from Elltoria. But through Krona, I planned on slowly getting to know the other maids better as well.



I finished up in the bedroom and made my way to the kitchen.

It was smaller than my home kitchen, but by no means was it lacking—there was enough space for more than ten chefs to work simultaneously.

A line of ingredients I'd requested sat atop the counter in a row.

I spotted eggs, sugar, and more. Lucian was also setting out utensils for my use.

Each one was something I'd transmuted from metal in advance. They were tools to assist in today's baking session.

With everything I needed at hand, I was just about ready to start cooking, when the head maid appeared in the kitchen.

"Krona! Come with me! We need more hands to polish the silver. It's taking much longer than I anticipated. Your Majesty, I apologize, but I need to borrow her for a while."

"Just my luck..." whimpered Krona, her voice full of disappointment as the head maid dragged her away.

I felt bad for her, but she had to do her job, after all. I would gift her some sweets later. For now, it was time to start cooking.

First, I separated the egg yolks from the whites.

I followed up by forming ice with a spell, then set it inside a box along with the bowl of egg whites.

I would still be able to proceed without this step, but by chilling the egg whites in advance, the meringue would be easier to whisk into the correct consistency when the time came.

This was the first dish of my own making since arriving in Wolfvarte. To celebrate (was that the right word?), I'd decided to make a chiffon cake.

This selection resulted from hearing that the kitchen staff had obtained a large number of fresh, high-quality eggs. Other potential dishes also came to mind, but a nice chiffon cake was one of the best ways to really savor the taste of the eggs.

While the egg whites sat in the icebox, I began to stir the yolks and sugar together to get the cake batter started.

Little by little, I added in vegetable oil and mixed it all together with my whisk.

The “vegetable” in question was the seeds of a plant called “gina,” apparently. In both flavor and appearance, the liquid strongly resembled normal cooking oil, so I used it as a substitute.

Some foods in this world were identical to what I ate on Earth, while others were brand-new to me, or were deceptively similar.

We had common foods like cabbages and onions, but there were also vegetables that didn’t appear to exist anywhere in this world, like eggplants. The closest we had was something that could only be called “imitation eggplant,” which had a round, curved body with reddish skin. They were even yellow on the inside, edible, and with a flavor not too different from that of regular eggplant. I imagined it would be a convenient substitute.

I would make use of what I had access to, and once I was used to those new ingredients, I would begin experimenting with others as well.

But first, I was working with the few ingredients I already knew well.

I was worried about a few steps in the chiffon cake recipe, but I wanted to push through it using magic, or whatever else I had to do.

I continued to add the ingredients, whisking them together loudly in the bowl.

On Earth, I used a hand mixer for this step, but now, it was all up to my own strength.

Muscles, activate! You mix those ingredients together! Show them how hard you’ve been working out!

I picked up the pace more and more, cheering myself on internally. I whisked and whisked as fast as I could while still keeping an eye on the contents of the bowl.

Finally, I switched to mixing with the wooden spatula to be sure everything was dissolved, then poured the batter into my specially made chiffon cake mold.

To make the cake rise nicely, I would have to take it out while it was still hot and flip the mold upside down to let it cool. For that purpose, I transmuted the mold to have a wine bottle–sized hole in the middle to keep the cake in place. I placed the mold into the warm oven and retrieved it later, once the surface of the cake was nice and brown.

Then I flipped the cake upside down and left it there for a while.

After checking to be sure it had cooled, I used metal skewers and a frosting knife to carefully coax the cake out.

“So fluffy...”

The texture looked perfect.

The cake had a soft bounce to it when I pushed on the surface, and it didn’t collapse at all. One section at the bottom didn’t come out of the mold very well, but I decided that gave it some charm.

For its very first creation in this world, the chiffon cake looked quite nice. I took it out to the dining room, cut it into slices, and covered it in whipped cream I’d made while working on the cake.

The cream was airy and light—the perfect texture. It looked just like a cloud as it sat atop the soft yellow cake.

The delicious-looking color combination filled me with joy just to see. The whipped cream also made for a nice change of taste and texture. I could hide the rough patches on the cake as well.

That night, I would definitely be dealing with sore muscles, but I didn’t have any regrets about making the cake itself.

“Your Majestyyy! I’ve finished up my work! Is there still some dessert left?”

“Welcome back, Krona. You have impeccable timing. The cake is ready to be tasted.”

“Hooray!”

With a joyous cheer, Krona came to sit across from me.

I handed her a slice of cake with the whipped cream piled high. Krona was

finally able to dig her fork in for her first taste.

“So light...! And fluffy?!” Krona’s eyes went wide after her first bite. Her pupils also expanded with excitement, just like a real cat. “It’s soft and sweet, and it practically melts in my mouth!!”

Krona’s eyes were sparkling with delight. I took a bite of the cake for myself.

It was both moist and airy, and I could taste the delicate flavor of sugar and egg with my whole mouth.

The cake’s perfect texture resulted from adding the vegetable oil to the batter in small amounts at a time.

Krona was mesmerized and finished her slice in the blink of an eye. Wordlessly, she held her plate out toward me, seeking another slice. I was glad to see how much she enjoyed the cake, but I couldn’t comply, so I shook my head at her in response.

“Unfortunately, this is all you can have for today. I want to give the rest to the staff as thanks for lending me their kitchen.

“That’s too bad... But you’re right, we can’t hog the whole cake to ourselves...”

I could feel Krona’s silent disappointment. Somehow, her tail looked limper than usual.

“...I’m planning to make this again, so when the time comes, could you share it with the other maids?”

“Yes! Thank you, Your Majesty!”

The tip of her tail perked up happily.

If she loved the chiffon cake this much, I must have assumed rightly.

I’d chosen to make a cake based on the idea that most women love sweets, and in this case, I appeared to have been correct.

Whenever I could, I planned on treating the maids and other servants to various meals to improve my relationship with them.

After finishing the chiffon cake, I drank the cup of black tea that Lucian had

prepared for me. It was then that I heard a knock at the dining room door. The man who entered was Gilbert, the head chef of this villa.

...He's as tall and lanky as ever, but was his face always this pale?

Gilbert always looked gloomy, but today, something about him seemed much worse.

His face, though handsome, was long and plagued by a melancholic look. On top of that, his tall body was slumped into an unflattering posture.

"Your Majesty, I heard that your dessert is ready to eat. Would you allow me to try it for myself?"

"Be my guest, please. I'd love to hear your thoughts."

I handed him another slice of cake.

After observing its appearance and smelling it, Gilbert went in for his first bite.

How will a real chef react to my finished chiffon cake?

I was a bit excited to find out, but then I watched as Gilbert's face grew even darker and more serious.

"Perhaps it's not to your liking...?" I asked him nervously.

But Gilbert immediately swung his head up to look at me. "No, it's quite delicious! This is just all the more reason..."

All the more reason to what?

I was glad to hear it tasted good enough, and yet, the look on his face was worryingly somber.

With wavering eyes, Gilbert reached into his breast pocket.

He then presented me with an envelope, which read...

"...Resignation?"

The writing was neat and thin, much like Gilbert himself, but the words were simple on their own.

"Has something happened in your personal life? Is your family all right?"

“No, it’s nothing like that. I’ve been prepared for this for some time now, and this chiffon cake only confirms my fears.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

I gave him cake. He ate it, calling it delicious. Then he went pale in the face, only to hand me a letter of resignation.

I couldn’t wrap my head around any of it.

“Your cake is incredible. Knowing that you’re this skilled of a chef yourself, Your Majesty, means my cooking won’t ever be able to live up to your expectations... I’m used to being fired, so if you’d please, go ahead and let me have it.”

“I wouldn’t do such a thing... I enjoy every meal you and the staff make for me, Gilbert.”

I wasn’t just being nice.

The day after I arrived at the royal villa, I asked the kitchen staff to start preparing lighter meals.

The kingdom of Wolfvarte was home to races other than humans. It was a land of diverse culinary culture, but the food was generally too rich and savory when it came to human high society.

Naturally, the staff were prepared to serve me dishes that were “properly” seasoned.

I couldn’t bring myself to request an entire menu change, so all I did was ask them to use fewer spices. My request served its purpose—their cooking was much more suitable to my palate that way.

The seasonings were reduced to a satisfactory level, and though they were still rich and spicy, these meals were the best gourmet cuisine I’d ever experienced in this world. Even aside from the flavor, I could see the care Gilbert and his staff took in their craft, from how they handled ingredients to their exquisite plating.

I could never fire a chef like Gilbert.

Having rejected his offer to resign and offering my own opinion, I could see

him relax considerably.

“In that case, I apologize. Between you asking me to change my recipes and taking up work in the kitchen, I got it in my head that you weren’t satisfied with my cooking, Your Majesty...”

“You’re mistaken. I borrowed the kitchen today because cooking is a hobby of mine, and I only asked you to change your seasonings because I prefer lighter meals. You and your staff have done a fine job of listening to my requests, so please be confident in your cooking.”

“...Thank you, Your Majesty, but someone like me doesn’t deserve such kind words.”

Gilbert’s gratitude sounded a lot more like self-depreciation. He was still being far too modest, even if I was the new queen of this kingdom.

“Gilbert, I’d like to ask you something... You said you’re used to being fired, so I wonder, does that mean you were fired from your last position, before you came to my villa?”

“Yes, I was. It’s an embarrassing story... Before I came here, I worked in a noblewoman’s kitchen, but things didn’t go so well between the other staff and me. I was dismissed because of that.”

...I see.

My coming to this kingdom and moving into this villa was all very sudden.

I was sure it must have been hard to gather a fine group of kitchen staff on such short notice. Having been let go from his last job, Gilbert had some baggage of his own, though he was still a fantastic cook. Perhaps that was why he was sent to work for me.

However, chefs had more to do than simply prepare meals.

They also had to maintain professional relationships with coworkers, as well as stay in the good favor of their employer. When working in the kitchens of royals, it was very important to maintain those social skills.

In some cases, chefs under the same roof would even form cliques, and the resulting wars would end with someone losing their job.

I didn't see Gilbert as a bad person, but he also didn't seem to have an assertive bone in his body...

As long as they couldn't find any major flaws in his skills as a chef or his personality, I imagined his coworkers would see him as a major target for workplace rivalry.

Gilbert appeared to have lost all confidence in his cooking after being driven out of his previous position.

"Please don't look so upset, Gilbert. Your talent and experience shine through in all your meals."

"Thank you, Your Majesty, but you needn't lie to a pathetic creature like me..."

"I'm not lying to you. I don't know if this will help...but if you're willing, would you do me the favor of helping me out in the kitchen, when you have the time?"

"...Helping you in the kitchen?"

"Yes. Can I count on you?"

I had many more recipes I wanted to try, but I was still a complete amateur when it came to the recipes and ingredients unique to this world. With an expert like Gilbert to help me, I believed I could make much faster progress in re-creating meals I knew from my days on Earth. The two of us would cook delicious food together, and hopefully, I could help Gilbert regain some confidence at the same time.



"...I think we'll be able to make some delicious meals together as well, so for all of those reasons, I asked Gilbert to help me with my cooking."

I sighed. That conversation with Gilbert happened three days ago already.

Listening to me recount my story was none other than the silver wolf, who was seated by my side.

I didn't know where he came from, but he made his way to me and apparently didn't feel like leaving.

Getting to see him again lifted my spirits, but sadly, he still wouldn't let me pet him.

The wolf would sit nearby and turn his nose in my direction for the occasional sniff, yet whenever I reached my hand out toward him, he would let out a grumbling noise, warning me to back off.

"Hmph. You're killing me, you know..."

There was such a good, fluffy boy right there, but I couldn't touch him.

The situation was utterly depressing, and since I needed something else to keep me occupied, I started speaking to the wolf.

At first, I was essentially just talking to myself, until...

"Grah?"

The further I got in the story, the more the wolf would cock his head at me, as if to ask what happened next. With a sort of back-and-forth developing, I continued on with my story for longer than I even meant to.

"What a smart wolf you are, following along with my story like that."

I knew there was no way he truly understood my words, of course. He was most likely responding to the tone of my voice and my facial expressions.

I still wanted to praise him for his level of understanding, though.

The wolf's expression looked somehow offended. It was as if he wanted to ask me, "*What kind of praise is that...?*" ...Or so I felt.

"What's wrong? I was just so impressed... Did I say something to upset you?"

I tried responding to him anyway, knowing he couldn't truly comprehend me.

Now that I think of it, I used to talk to Jiro in my past life too.

It was just a habit of mine, even though I probably looked like a crazy person muttering things to myself from anyone else's perspective.

"I just don't get you," I said to the silver wolf, observing him closely.

Those blue-green eyes stared back at me. His fur swayed as a gentle breeze blew past. The wolf was so beautiful and majestic, and yet, I knew almost

nothing about him.

One thing I did know was that the bottom of his paws sported little black pads. They were smooth, without any large cracks in the skin, and stood out against his silver fur. I desperately wanted to give them a good squish.

“Paw pads are the work of the gods...”

I scrunched my fingers, imagining squishing those little pads.

For a moment, I felt the wolf looking at me with a mocking expression. But I was sure I just imagined it.

He narrowed his eyes as he looked at me—the silver wolf, whose name was still a mystery to me.

I imagined it to be a proud, noble name, for some reason, but I didn’t have any real hints to go on. Edgar didn’t seem to know either, so I decided I would have to ask Melvin the next time we met.

“...That reminds me. I’ve been curious...” The silver wolf met my gaze and raised his chin toward me, as if beckoning me to continue my thought. “You really don’t shed any fur, do you?”

The animal’s coat was beautiful and lush. All I wanted was a chance to pet that perfect fur, but still...didn’t the wolf get hot under all that?

When I looked around, I saw that all of Edgar’s wolves were nearly finished shedding their winter coats. Some were even sporting their completed summer coats. These wolves had a slimmer, sharper look to them.

Compared with them, the silver wolf didn’t look like he had lost a single strand of fur in his life.

Even when I used the slicker brush, he did seem to enjoy how it felt, judging by how his eyes started to close, but I remembered him losing only a few strands of fur to the brush itself.

“If you keep your winter coat like that, the summer heat won’t be kind to your roots. I hope you don’t get ugly bald patches— Ow! Ow, ow, ow!!”

“Bald?! Me?! Don’t be foolish!”

The silver wolf butted his head against me in what felt like a form of protest.

It was a pretty painful blow on its own, even though I knew the creature could've given me a much worse bite if he wanted to.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Will you forgive me?"

"Fine, as long as you get it."

I could practically hear those words as the wolf let out a little snort at me.

Maybe he really does understand humans?

Doubt started to form in my mind. While I worked on making up with the silver wolf, I heard Lucian mutter something from behind me.

"The nerve of that wolf, giving Lady Laetitia attitude like that..."

I could only smile awkwardly back upon hearing his disapproval. It was then that Krona appeared with a message.

"Your Majestyyy! You've received an invitation!!!"

She ran over to me, lifting the hem of her dress above her feet, and came to a stop in front of the garden gates. Her eyes were glued to the wolves in the yard.

Perhaps, as feline beastfolk, Krona was uncomfortable with dogs, including the wolves. I'd already noticed that, for whatever reason, Krona never seemed to approach me when I was playing with the wolves.

"Lucian, could you fetch me that invitation?"

"As you wish."

He made a dash for Krona and quickly came back with the invitation in no time.

The envelope was made of high-quality paper and sealed with wax that formed an insignia.

"An invitation from Lady Natalie...?"

The silver wolf's ears perked up when he heard me.

Lucian already had my letter opener in hand. I took it from him and swiped it through the wax, unsealing the envelope.

“Two days from now, Lady Natalie wants me to have lunch with her at her villa...”

It was a lunch invitation, sent by a woman who was part of the reason I was here in the first place.

Natalie had once been a candidate to marry King Glenreed herself.



AS for why a former potential queen was living within the palace walls alongside the actual queen...

That reason went all the way back to the very foundation of Wolfvarte as a kingdom.

King Glenreed came from an old family that had held on to the crown for hundreds of years now.

However, the kingdom of Wolfvarte itself was less than two hundred years old.

Back then, there were five small countries in this area of the continent, including one ruled by King Glenreed’s ancestor. These small countries were looked down upon for their size and constantly troubled by the threat of invaders.

To protect themselves from the neighboring lands and the menacing demons, the five countries came together to form one kingdom ruled by King Glenreed’s ancestor, the most promising leader out of the bunch.

The capital city of Wolfvarte, where I now lived, was the same land that King Glenreed’s family controlled all those hundreds of years ago.

Now, surrounding this center part of the kingdom in all directions were the locations of the four former smaller countries—to its north, south, east, and west.

They were all part of one kingdom now, but their time as five countries was still recent history, and so these regions didn’t yet exist in perfect harmony.

King Glenreed’s family controlled the throne throughout all of this, but the descendants of the former royalty of the other four countries still wielded

power in Wolfvarte as dukes and duchesses today.

This also had an effect on the selection of the queen.

The queen was generally a descendant of royalty from one of the four other lands.

The story differed a bit when it came to concubines, but historically, the queens were noblewomen born in one of the four regions outside of Wolfvarte's capital.

Every generation, the king is provided with candidates from those select noble families in all four regions, from whom he chooses his queen.

Two years ago, King Glenreed received his four candidates from the outer regions. Only a year had passed since His Majesty ascended to the throne after the sudden death of his father.

Known as the Silver Wolf King, His Majesty had achieved many successes in battle, but he lacked any real influence on the internal affairs of Wolfvarte.

For that reason, he had no choice but to give the four powerful queen candidates villas here within the castle walls, where they quietly carried out their war to win the crown.

From what I'd heard, the candidates had tried to approach His Majesty directly, but as a hater of women, he never thought to accept any of them.

...That hatred probably stemmed from political reasons, now that I thought about it.

This was His Majesty's third year as king. He was still in the middle of building support within the kingdom.

If he chose a queen immediately and lost the backing of their competitors' families, Wolfvarte could fall into a troubled state of affairs. That's where I came in—to prevent an undesirable outcome like that for the king.

He didn't want a queen from one of those four territories, but he couldn't leave that position open forever, and thus, he selected me to be the placeholder queen for the time being.

Again, the title of queen is pretty much always given to someone from one of

those four families. No one in this kingdom, least of all me, believed that I would be the queen forever. I was a way for him to buy time so he could consolidate power until he was ready to find the true queen.

That was the only role required of me in this land—the time-limited, figurehead queen of Wolfvarte.

Two years of this “white marriage” would be all it took for me to fulfill my duty and be able to give up the royal title.

For that reason, all four queen candidates still lived in royal villas, continuing to set their sights upon securing the crown for themselves someday.

“Your Majesty, I welcome you to the home of Lady Natalie.”

A man wearing a butler’s uniform greeted me politely with a bow of his head.

Lady Natalie—a previous candidate to be queen—was the daughter of the ruling family from the western region.

The exterior of her beautiful villa was made up of intricately carved stone.

Both the location—closer to the main palace—and the size of her house bested those of my own. For whatever reason, I had been given a house much farther away, and though I had a few theories about that, I decided not to bother with them, since it wasn’t an inconvenience to me.

My home sat deep inside the woods.

It was an isolated place, perfect for me to live the life of leisure I so desired.

I spent my days playing with wolves and doing all the cooking I wanted.

I was grateful for this life, regardless of King Glenreed’s intentions.

Each day was relaxing and carefree.

But still, I was the queen of this land, even if it was in name only.

The other four candidates had spent the last ten days scrambling to be the first to interact with me, and now it appeared that Lady Natalie was the one to emerge victorious.

She was just one of the former candidates for queen, but there was still a chance she could end up in my position a few years from now.

Unable to reject her invitation, I reluctantly dragged myself out of my beloved home, putting my life of leisure on pause to attend lunch with her.

Well, I was also curious to find out for myself what kind of person she was.

“Please have a seat, Your Majesty.”

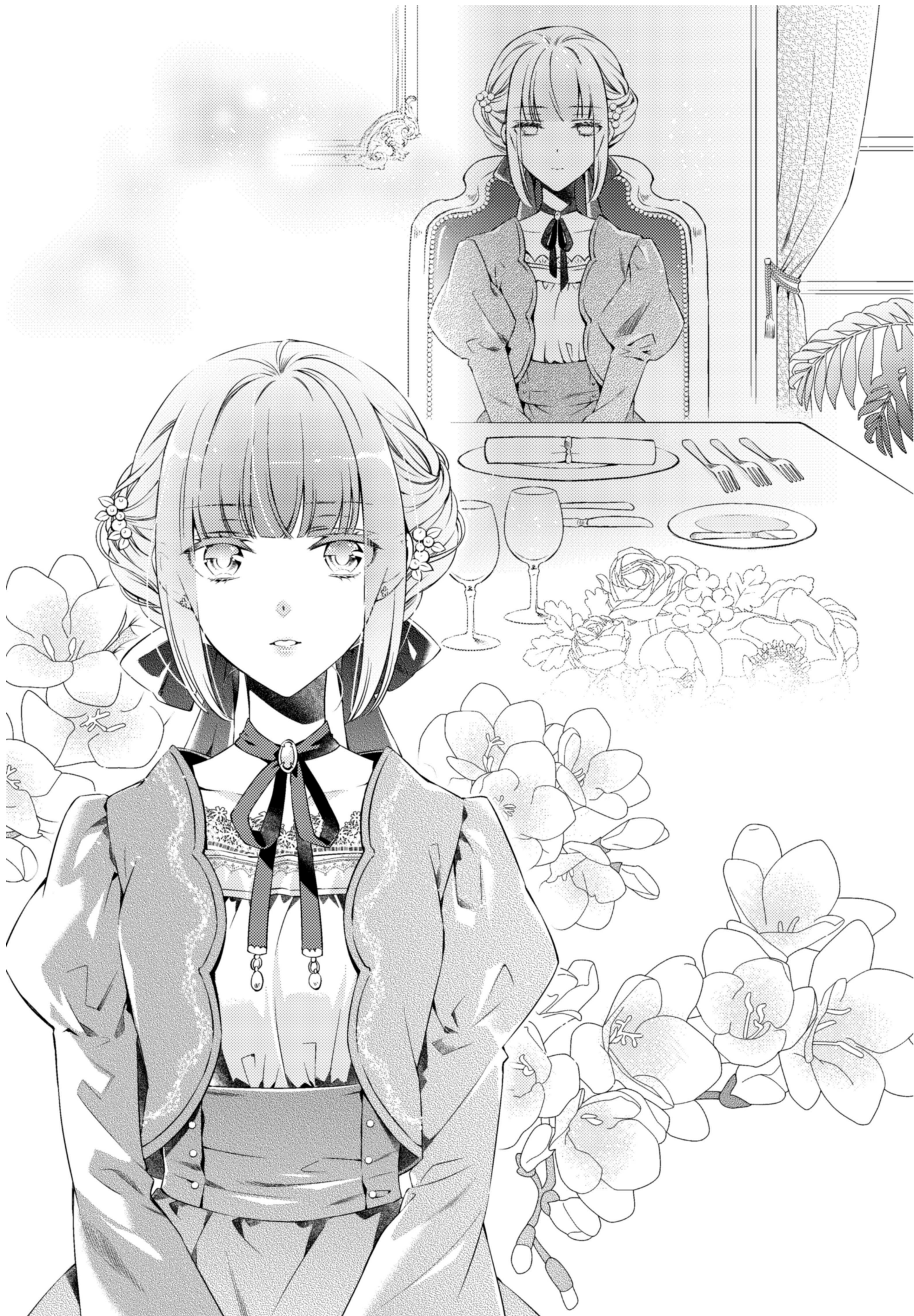
The servant opened the doors to the dining room and ushered me inside.

Covered in glass fixtures and furniture, the room had a dazzling interior.

My nose was abruptly filled with the scent of spices and seasonings when I passed through the doorway.

The staff were waiting on my arrival to serve lunch, but now that I was already picking up the rich scents of food, I knew it had to mean the smells had long since permeated the walls of the dining room.

I could smell the rich, overseasoned food even when it wasn't around. I was already starting to get depressed. With a mental sigh, I noticed the young girl with light-blue hair staring at me.



“Your Majesty, I’m honored to have you as a guest in my home. Everyone here welcomes you today.”

The young woman’s voice rang through the room like the sound of a glass bell.

However, her tone was cold as the words slipped from her petite lips.

She was the youngest candidate for queen, and daughter of the duke who controlled the western region of Wolfvarte.

Once I’d exchanged greetings with Lady Natalie, taking a moment to observe her doll-like face, we took our seats at the dining table.

Our conversation was brief, only a sentence or two each, until Lady Natalie exchanged glances with her servant.

The food was carried to us, and with it, an assaulting smell.

I kept my expression composed, but on the inside, I wanted nothing more than to be back home.

Each dish was set onto the table—piles of food heaped atop the golden-accented white plates.

Silver cutlery lay at our place settings.

This was customary among high society in our world, due to how silver reacted when coming into contact with poison.

I picked up my fork, used it to form a single bite of ham and cheese, then carried the appetizer to my lips.

...Salty and spicy. Yep.

The ham was sprinkled with pepper and nutmeg, stinging the inside of my mouth as soon as it made contact. I couldn’t even feel the texture of the ham, the way the tip of my tongue had gone numb from the spices.

Even the cheese was covered in seasoning. My poor tongue never had a moment’s rest.

Years of eating the rich food of high society should have left me accustomed to it by now, but this was even worse than usual. It wasn’t even a question of

quality—I was basically eating a plate of spices, at that point.

“How do you find it, Your Majesty? The spices are imported through the harbor in my territory, and the food is the prize work of my incredibly skilled chef. Is it acceptable?

“...Thank you for using so many of your exquisite spices on my behalf. That’s very generous of you.”

I gave her the most dignified smile I could muster and answered in a way that wouldn’t hurt Lady Natalie’s feelings. In truth, I wanted nothing more than to leave the table entirely, but it was important that I mind my manners.

The man standing by the window broke out in a proud smile when he heard my praise. He was wearing a white chef’s uniform, so I assumed he was the villa’s head chef. He stood tall and proud, basking in the glow of his accomplishment.

I got the feeling the two of us wouldn’t get along very well.

In addition to the rich food, he seemed rather emboldened by the praise for his cooking. Neither of those things made me particularly want to become acquainted with him any further.

After lunch was served, Lady Natalie and I continued on with a smattering of conversation as we ate.

From what I’d heard, the girl was one year younger than me, making her sixteen years old. She conducted herself in a very proper manner, but something about her seemed quiet and almost cold.

Aside from the occasional smile she would give me so as not to come off as impolite, Lady Natalie was practically expressionless.

Was it possible she was just nervous about meeting me for the first time?

I couldn’t rule it out, even though from what I could see, her hands moved smoothly as she used her silverware.

With a rumored nickname like “the Doll Princess,” I suspected this was just her normal demeanor.

Quietly, I kept an eye on Lady Natalie and the people who surrounded us

while finishing my lunch. As if to live up to the abundance of spices, the meat dish was also heavy with oil, and I imagined my stomach would be quite displeased by it.

Once lunch was over, Lady Natalie and I both drank down our tall glasses of lemon water. The look on her face was as unreadable as ever, but somehow, I got the sense that the drink had refreshed her greatly.

...Could it be that Lady Natalie doesn't like rich foods either?

As I was filled with a new sense of sympathy, Lady Natalie turned her head, her eyes now fixed on me.

"Your Majesty, thank you so very much for allowing us to entertain you today. Were you satisfied with your meal?"

"Indeed. It was a lovely course."

"I'm so glad to hear it. In that case..."

In that case?

Lady Natalie fell silent, unable to impose her request. With her mouth closed, the girl's face looked just like that of a perfectly crafted toy doll.

The woman who had been posted behind Lady Natalie suddenly stepped forward.

She looked to be in her midthirties, to my eyes. Her hair was fastened into a neat bun atop her head. The woman's dress was also detailed and expensive-looking, though not as much as what Lady Natalie was wearing.

"Pardon my intrusion, Your Majesty. My name is Diaz. Would you be so kind as to allow me to speak for Lady Natalie?"

"...As long as she's all right with that..."

Diaz Diegleys.

Diaz was the youngest sister of Lady Natalie's father, and she had married into the Diegleys family—a branch of Lady Natalie's. She appeared to serve as some kind of chaperone or helper for Lady Natalie, who was still very young.

It had only been ten days since my arrival in this kingdom.

When I wasn't playing with my wolves, I was learning the names and basic information about these noble families. Memorizing that much would have been impossible in my past life. But here, I was used to it, so it didn't bother me.

Memorization was something my oldest brother always insisted on as part of my education. He was known as an exemplary noble son, but only I knew that, when it came to education, he was a monster. With his handsome face, he'd mercilessly criticize my work. Sometimes I still saw that smile in my dreams...

The reason I got through my grueling royal education in the first place was largely in part because of my brother's training. He did dote on me as his little sister, but only because of how ruthless his teachings were. Still, the love and education he gave me were a help to me today, so I was very thankful to have received them.

While mentally showing him my appreciation, I watched Lady Natalie to see her response.

She nodded, and Diaz took command of the situation.

"By accepting our invitation and joining us here today, may we take that as a commitment to our faction?"

She held nothing back in her question.

"My role as queen is to be a placeholder. I have no intention of offering support to any of the four candidates for queen."

"Then why did you agree to meet us here?"

"I wanted you to know that we will not be enemies. I won't be backing any of the candidates, nor will I oppose them."

This was my plan of action here in Wolfvarte.

I would have my title for two years, and I would keep my nose out of things like politics and the selection of my successor.

Just as King Glenreed wished, I was going to buy time for him while living a quiet, peaceful life in the villa.

"The four candidates for queen, you say..." Diaz's lips curled into a smirk.

“Sure, that may be the official number, but it’s a bit different in reality. There’s a hierarchy you have to take into account. You understand why it would be bad if, for example, the next queen was from a powerless place like the southern territory.”

“...Is that so? I’m sorry to say that no, I don’t understand.”

Unwilling to say anything disrespectful of the southern candidate, I could only offer a stiff smile.

“I suppose it’s only natural you don’t understand, being a foreigner in our land.”

This time, there was no way to interpret her words as anything other than condescending. At first, I thought she was trying to get a rise out of me. But now, I could tell she simply looked down on me. Maybe she was just a rude person.

“The southern candidate can’t be considered, and the north and east are beastfolk...‘mutts,’ that is. I think you understand what I’m getting at. There’s only one candidate fit to take the throne and become queen.”

“...Yes, I do understand now.”

“*Mutts*,” she’d called them. And I hadn’t forgotten about being served the excessively spicy meal only moments ago.

This was all the work of Diaz, and most likely, the woman who’d allowed her to speak—Lady Natalie as well. They were now openly insulting beastfolk and shamelessly trying to win my approval.

“Yes, I do understand now. You’ve made it very clear I should stay far away from you and your camp.”

Even as I rejected her offer, Lady Natalie’s doll-like face showed no ripples of emotion.

Diaz raised her eyebrows and leaned forward to speak for Lady Natalie. “Your Majesty, could you repeat that? I’m afraid you might be confused.”

“I’m not confused at all. I want you both to know that I have no intention of forming any kind of alliance with you.”

“...And are you sure of that decision?” She glared at me. I could feel her disapproval loud and clear. “If you don’t pick Lady Natalie, the only other candidates are two mutts and a human from a region with no power. Any way you look at it, those aren’t acceptable options.”

“As I’ve already said, I won’t be taking sides, and I won’t be making enemies. Even if I were to favor a candidate, the last person I’d select is someone who refers to beastfolk as ‘mutts.’”

“Why do you take offense over an accurate description? Don’t tell me, Your Majesty, that you’re so pure of heart that you see beasts and men as equals, do you?”

Her voice dripped with sarcasm. She was challenging me.

Beastfolk.

Partially because of my past-life memories, I felt no contempt for beastfolk, and I wasn’t about to mock them like this.

In fact, I would go so far as to say I wanted to befriend them and learn more about their kind. I knew that few people on this continent shared those views, but that wasn’t the problem before me at the moment.

“Beastfolk make up nearly half of this kingdom’s population. I may only have my position for political purposes, but as the queen, do you really think I’d approve of you insulting half the kingdom?”

“...You sure like to sound noble, don’t you?”

“What kind of person interprets basic decency as some sort of scheme? I understand you two are no friend to beastfolk. But being so unable to control your own feelings, to the point that you display your disdain in my presence, makes you much lower than beastfolk in my eyes.”

“...What did you just say?”

A challenge begets a challenge.

If the situation were different, I could have chosen to let this be water under the bridge, but Diaz was being so blatant in her disrespect for me. I couldn’t let her land every punch, so I had to counterattack.

“I simply have to respond to that. You really mean to imply we’re inferior to those mutts?”

“Yes, I do, if your conduct today is to be believed.”

“So you, a human, want to go hold hands with a bunch of mutts?”

“Be it human or beastfolk, we should only judge someone based on their heart and actions, wouldn’t you say?”

“What about us do you find so insulting, exactly?”

“Well, it’s your words and attitudes, as well as the lunch I just ate.”

The middle-aged chef standing against the wall spoke up when he heard the word *lunch*.

“...Your Majesty, please allow me to speak.”

“All right, please do.”

“I simply have to inquire. I, the head chef of this villa, poured my heart, soul, and all the spices I had to produce such a culinary accomplishment. If this still wasn’t enough to satisfy you, perhaps you suffer from some sort of disorder of the taste buds?”

...You think my palate’s the problem?

He presented it as a humble objection, but there was no denying that last sentence only served to mock me.

I made a mental note of this man’s desire to get the last word in.

“It’s not just me. I thought a chef such as yourself would understand. I know the course you served today was supposed to be a meal of the highest class, but how can you excuse using that many spices in your dishes?”

“What about my spices? The way I cook is in line with the current trends from Lady Natalie’s hometown. Perhaps it’s a culture you’re too unfamiliar with; to reject my cooking for such a reason is simply immature.”

Who’s the one acting immature here?

The chef liked his retorts. Again, he wanted the last word.

His argument succeeded in slightly irritating me.

“I’m not rejecting your cooking. I ate every bite and kept a smile on my face the whole time.”

“Then why did you wait until now to make your complaints?”

“Because I understood what it would mean to accept your cooking. The amount of spice you use isn’t some ancient tradition. Why, it’s just something that’s come around in the last ten years, is it not?”

“Yes, and as a chef, it’s only natural to keep up with the trends.”

“Even when that ‘trend’ is being used as harassment?”

Harassment.

Today’s meal had been seasoned half to death as an indirect means of provocation.

Overseasoned meals were common among the upper classes of this entire continent, but today’s lunch took it even further.

It all started as a means of harassing beastfolk.

When it came to the five senses, most beastfolk were much more sensitive than humans. Naturally, this also included their sense of smell.

With their sharp noses, they were also extra perceptive of food seasonings. Because of this, beastfolk had a long history of abstaining from rich foods.

It was a simple cultural difference...and yet, some were eager to mock this practice.

The main perpetrators were the humans of the western region of Wolfvarte.

Despite a nearly equal ratio of humans to beastfolk across the kingdom, in the western region alone, humans made up almost 90 percent of the population.

Though they now existed as one kingdom, these regions used to be five separate countries of their own. Each of the four regions had different population makeups, and their people behaved in different ways.

The residents of the west held deeply rooted beliefs of superiority over beastfolk, due to the skewed proportion of their population.

Compared with other countries throughout our continent, Wolfvarte had a large number of beastfolk. But their more common presence also meant they faced more direct forms of prejudice and animosity. Humans and beastfolk had a very complicated relationship.

For example, Diaz's western territory, which was mostly populated by humans, was often in disagreement with the regions home to many beastfolk. The western style of cooking was one of the obvious results of that dynamic.

On our continent, spices were a symbol of one's wealth, and in the western region, beastfolk were made fun of for not liking spices.

They intentionally served beastfolk overseasoned food, and when the beastfolk rejected that style of cooking, humans berated them for their underdeveloped palates.

This childish form of harassment had only intensified over time...and now their region's cooking was served completely doused in spices.

...What exactly do they think food is for?

I was questioning their sanity, honestly, but unfortunately, this was the reality of the western region of Wolfvarte.

The custom was unbelievable to me, a former twenty-first-century Japanese citizen. But even without my experience on Earth, I still wasn't ever going to take to this style of cooking.

"I don't mean to reject the entire food culture that was born from your homeland. But as a guest in your home, being served a meal this absurdly rich isn't something I could just ignore."

I turned my gaze from the head chef to Lady Natalie. Even for something as ordinary as food, there were political implications when it came to serving a guest in a formal setting.

"Let me ask you something, Lady Natalie. Can you truly say you enjoyed your meal this afternoon? You thought it was a delicious lunch to treat me to?"

"I..."

Her face finally revealed a real expression. Her mouth hung open in

hesitation, until she was interrupted by Diaz.

“Your Majesty, you’re not making any sense at all. Only the lowest of commoners would judge a meal’s value on their own flavor preferences. A woman of status should only be valuing the origin and history of her meals.”

The woman’s rapid dialogue made Lady Natalie freeze up and return to her doll-like state.

Diaz wasn’t incorrect. Members of high society saw cooking as an expression of status. But the accuracy of her words made today’s meal all the more unacceptable to me.

These two had served something much more extreme than a normal high-class meal. This was a western-region style of cooking meant as a form of harassment against beastfolk. In other words, it was a silent declaration of their prejudiced views.

“It’s more than just the flavor. It’s the origin and history of the meal you chose to serve me that I cannot accept.”

I wanted to let out a sigh of exasperation, but I kept it in and stood up from my place at the table. Lucian pulled my chair back with perfect timing, which I found reassuring and which let me turn to face Lady Natalie.

“If you two continue to mock beastfolk like you’ve done today, then I will have no friendship to offer you. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way now.”

“...Farewell. I’ll await the next day we meet,” Lady Natalie offered quietly.

It was then that Diaz’s deep voice reached my ears.

“...You’re going to regret your decision eventually, I do believe. When Lady Natalie becomes the next queen, she won’t let you cozy up to her after today. That might spell trouble for the relationship between your kingdom and ours.”

“But Lady Natalie hasn’t been selected as the next queen, has she?”

“So what? Those other mutt candidates won’t get along with a human such as yourself, Your Majesty. One day, you’ll see what a grave mistake you’ve made by turning us down.”

Diaz smirked triumphantly.

I get it now. That's why she's been acting so arrogant toward me.

She believed that as a human, I would inherently be at odds with the beastfolk candidates. If that were the case, I'd be in a position with much less power and have no choice but to form an alliance with Lady Natalie.

That was the feeling I was starting to get, and her words finally confirmed my suspicions.

"I don't believe such a day will ever come. After all, His Majesty should be the one to choose his next wife."

King Glenreed, whom I hadn't seen in over ten days.

I believed that the king was aware of just how prejudiced Lady Natalie and Diaz were. If he was forced to choose Lady Natalie as my successor, knowing her character... His Majesty and the kingdom itself would very likely be dealt a blow to their reputation and relationships.

Perhaps I should meet with His Majesty and ask him who he plans to select after me.

With that last thought, I turned to excuse myself from the room.

In that moment, I heard a quiet voice muttering something from behind me.

"...If she's foolish enough to reject my lady's help, it makes sense why the queen would hire a man like Gilbert."

That voice belonged to the bigmouthed head chef.

Why was he bringing up Gilbert at a time like that? I couldn't just ignore the comment.

"...What's that supposed to mean? If you have something you want to say, please say it to my face."

I gave the chef my most evil, devilish smile.

The man was purposefully spouting insults just loud enough for me to hear. This wasn't the time for kind tactics, so I decided I had to make a real move.

The chef froze in fear when he saw my father's signature smile on my face.

Diaz and even Lady Natalie seemed to stiffen as well, but I didn't sense any

guilt from them, even though they were the ones responsible for him as his superiors.

“Well? Don’t hush up now. I’d like to hear it. Or did you think you could get away with making your comments as long as you were muttering behind my back?”

“...! I’m very sorry...”

His face grew a deep shade of red with his apology. Those words were remorseful, but his expression showed a different story.

“But, Your Majesty, I was only thinking of your best interest!”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I wanted to warn you! Gilbert was forced to leave this house when he fell out of favor with Lady Natalie. If you still want to use that shameless man as your head chef, your reputation will surely suffer for it!”

“That’s the first I’m hearing of it.”

Gilbert told me about how he had been fired from his previous position, but I didn’t know he had been working in Lady Natalie’s home.

He’d hidden those details out of a duty to keep his past work confidential.

Now, I was surprised indeed to learn about this new connection. Diaz continued on in the meantime.

“That man had the audacity to insult Lady Natalie by complaining that all the rich foods were hurting her and needed to be changed, like she’s a sickly little girl or something. Giran was smart enough to report that behavior to me. Gilbert doesn’t know his place, and he had no right to work in this kitchen, so I let him go. You have my sympathies, being forced to employ a man like that.”

“...I see. So that’s why Gilbert was fired and came to work for me.”

Though I’d only known the man for a short time, I could tell that Gilbert’s skills when it came to cooking were the real deal.

If anything, I was relieved to find out why such an outstanding chef like him could ever be let go from a job at all.

Gilbert wasn't an assertive man, but he was a respectable chef. I knew that was why he felt compelled to speak up about the overseasoned food here at the villa. As a result, he'd been targeted and forced out of his job.

"Thank you for sharing... But unfortunately for you, I value Gilbert's work, so I don't need you to worry about me. Lady Natalie..."

I turned to look at the silent girl.

"Allow me to ask you one last question. Chef Giran just stated that Gilbert was forced to leave after incurring your scorn, but is that really true? Did you decide you didn't need Gilbert anymore, and so you had him dismissed?"

"...Yes, I did." She spoke through tightly gritted teeth.

But that was all she had to say, and then she shut right back up.

Lady Natalie seldom spoke at all, and when Diaz, her aunt, interrupted her, she had nothing to say in return.

Officially, Lady Natalie, the daughter of a duke and a candidate for queen, was higher in status than Diaz was.

Does her aunt have something on her?

I was curious about the real story, but there wasn't any way I could press it further, so I let it go for now. Unfortunately, my attempt to rouse some real personality out of her hadn't been successful.

I was leaving their villa, my heart unsettled, when I was met by a servant on the way to my carriage. He handed me a sealed envelope.

"Your Majesty, King Glenreed has requested your presence. He's asked that you meet with him in the palace after departing from Lady Natalie's villa."



"IT'S been a while, my queen. Have you been doing well in the woods?"

King Glenreed's voice echoed through the reception hall.

His Majesty was as beautiful as ever, sitting atop the throne and looking at me with those handsome features of his. His expression was frigid, and it made him look all the more intimidating.

Even though I grew up with handsome brothers, good looks still had quite an effect on me, and my heart skipped a beat when I laid eyes on the king...though I kept a prim and proper smile on my face all the while.

I took a moment to be grateful for my oldest brother's tough but loving training, as well as for my royal education.

"Yes, and thank you for your concern. I've been living a life of ease in the villa without any complaint."

"...You're satisfied with that, out there in the middle of nowhere?"

"Weren't you the one who gave it to me, Your Majesty?"

"That's right. Have you no grievances with me? You've been sent to the woods without any visits from your husband. I expected to hear some grief from you."

"I'm not angry. Actually, I'm grateful to you, my king."

"Oh?" he pressed.

As a test, I stared deeply into those blue-green eyes of his.

"I know your absence isn't a sign of disrespect. In fact, I believe it's quite the opposite. I'm to be the figurehead queen for a short period of time, but if the two of us start spending too much time together, people will think there's something more to the story."

"Right you are. We're husband and wife in name only, but that name can still draw suspicions."

"And a misunderstanding like that would be a great inconvenience to me. If people were to believe I had won your affections... Well, Lady Natalie and the other candidates wouldn't take it lightly."

I could already see a future where the women launched harassment campaigns against me.

Actually, harassment would be the best outcome. More likely, I'd become the target of assassinations or something equally sinister. That was the absolute last thing I wanted. I'd come to love my leisurely life and all the furry friends it contained.

“Thus, I appreciate your lack of visits, Your Majesty. That’s why you left me to my own affairs, isn’t that right?”

“You sure think a lot of me over something so small.”

“That’s not my only reason. You gave me that villa to protect me from being caught up in pointless disputes, didn’t you?”

The simple house that could barely be called a “royal villa,” tucked deep within the forest. At first glance, it seemed like the opposite of a warm welcome, but His Majesty knew what he was doing.

“Aside from me, the other four candidates for queen also live here in villas within the castle walls. They all have nicer houses in more central positions than mine...but if you sent one of them into the woods so that I could take a better villa from them, that candidate would quickly come to detest me.”

Behind closed doors, the four candidates were at war to determine who would be the next queen.

The only reason there was some sense of peace now was because King Glenreed never treated any of them with special kindness—or rudeness.

If the king upset this order to give me one of the candidate’s villas, things would get ugly for both His Majesty and me.

“That’s why I’m perfectly content in my forest villa, without any visits from you. I’ll stand at your side as queen for the occasional event or diplomatic dealing...but aside from that, I’d prefer if we kept our distance, Your Majesty.”

“...So you won’t be after my favor, or my love, or anything of that sort?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Our marriage is a political matter and has no basis in romance. All I want from you, Your Majesty, is a healthy amount of distance.”

“A healthy amount of distance...”

I felt like I caught a hint of unhappiness in his voice. I’d heard of his hatred for women; maybe he was upset that a woman was now the one laying down boundaries for him.

“...Very well. I’ll keep my distance. That’s what I want from this marriage too.”

King Glenreed gave me a nod.

It was a bit of a relief. My words seemed to have persuaded him.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. We may lack the relationship of a normal married couple, but as your queen, I’d like to support you however I can.”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to it. I’ve been see— I’ve been receiving reports on how you spend your days at the villa, and I’m sure you’ll be a fitting queen for both the humans and beastfolk of this kingdom.”

“I appreciate those words... However, may I ask you something?”

“What’s that? Speak up,” he pressed me.

King Glenreed had a sharp tongue at times, but he was still kind enough to listen when people spoke.

“There are a number of beastfolk among my servants at the villa. Were you the one who selected them, Your Majesty?”

“I did. I gave the orders to send you some beastfolk servants, but I didn’t pick out anyone in particular. Why? Do you have a complaint?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. Each and every one of my servants is doing a magnificent job... But was it your intention to gauge my reaction to the beastfolk?”

I remembered my initial journey to reach this very castle.

We stayed in many inns along the way, and each time, the staff that welcomed us were entirely composed of humans. But that didn’t mean there were no beastfolk staff at all.

I believed this was their attempt at being considerate of me.

Most humans on our continent don’t look upon beastfolk very kindly. Knowing this and wanting to avoid displeasing me, I believed they’d intentionally kept the beastfolk staff from welcoming me to their inns.

Though I had no ill feelings toward beastfolk, I understood why the inns did this. With the experiences I’d had, I was a bit surprised to see beastfolk working

as servants at my villa.

Maybe there wasn't a deeper meaning to it, but His Majesty's answer made me think I was on the right track.

"So, you asked that I have beastfolk among my servants. Does that mean you wanted to observe how I would treat them? What would you have done if I was prejudiced against beastfolk?"

"I'd have seen your true nature and dealt with it however I saw fit."

"...I see."

He was being ambiguous, but that certainly didn't sound very pleasant.

I imagined myself being completely restricted to my villa and truly becoming the "placeholder queen" once and for all.

I felt better knowing His Majesty's intentions, but now I also knew I was being tested in that way.

"...You seem undisturbed. You're not angry to learn I was testing your character?"

"Actually, I'm quite relieved."

"...How so?"

"Because now I know you had some level of interest in me. Leaving me alone in that villa is something I wished for as well...but even if I'm merely a figurehead queen, if you had no interest in determining my personality whatsoever, well, for all you knew, I could have been a threat to the kingdom. But you did your duty to learn what kind of person I am. I'm very relieved to hear you didn't just want to forget about me."

"...You're either very strange or very smart to rejoice in receiving such a test. Tell me, which is it?"

"Who knows? I'll leave that judgment to you, my king."

...Strange, huh?

I meant to give an answer more appropriate for someone in my position, but ever since regaining my past-life memories, there were times I found myself

unintentionally straying from the norms of this world. Maybe that's why I seemed strange.

I finished my explanation, smiled at the king, then decided to finish what I'd come here for.

"Now that you know I have no intention of belittling beastfolk, I'd like to ask *you* for your opinion of them, and of Lady Natalie as well."

Though his predecessors had taken beastfolk as queens, they were still a family of humans. His Majesty had no animal ears or tail himself. His appearance was just like that of any other human, excluding his good looks.

Incidentally, there were a few reasons why a human king was the acknowledged ruler of a kingdom inhabited by both humans and beastfolk.

The biggest reason was the legend of His Majesty's ancestors being wolf spirits.

Though they were humans, because they were considered to be the descendants of wolves, both humans and beastfolk recognized them as king.

Even though it was just a legend, it was a legend the public liked.

"...I was invited to lunch at Lady Natalie's villa this afternoon, where I was forced to hear all about her disdain for beastfolk. Can I ask what you think of that girl?"

"I don't feel anything about Natalie either way, honestly, since she's nothing but a doll."

I sympathized with his answer a bit. Lady Natalie was beautiful, but talking to her felt like making conversation with a particularly lifelike doll, and I never knew how to respond.

"...But if I had to rate her as a potential queen, I'd say she's pretty far away from the mark right now. All the people around her, like her father and her aunt, are nothing but trouble."

His Majesty seemed to be looking for a way to rid himself of Diaz and the others.

However, for the nobles of the western region of this land, looking down on

beastfolk was the most natural thing in the world. Aside from her prejudice toward beastfolk, Lady Natalie had made no major blunders. It was difficult to take her out of consideration for the crown without more of a direct reason, it seemed.

“Thank you very much for letting me hear your thoughts, Your Majesty. I have no intention of being friends with Lady Natalie or her group either. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes, that’s the best plan. If anything changes, I’ll let you know, so just stick to your quiet life in the villa for now.”

Thank goodness.

I had direct permission from the king to stay at home and live my life of leisure.

I was also relieved to hear that Lady Natalie and her group weren’t going to get any favorable treatment. It made me glad I’d left the villa at all today. Now I could go home and play with the wolves as much as I wanted.

I’d eaten terrible food, put up with Diaz and the chef who always wanted the last word, and had a dialogue with His Majesty.

I was starting to get tired. All I wanted was to eat delicious food and relax with my furry friends.

I wonder if I’ll get to see the silver wolf today, I wondered as I excused myself in front of the king.



“JUST what is with that woman...?”

Muttering to himself, Glenreed stared off in the direction Laetitia had left in.

The reason he had shipped her off to the forest. The reason he never visited her. The reason a few of her servants were beastfolk.

Laetitia had correctly guessed Glenreed’s reasoning behind every single one of those points. In fact, she wasn’t wrong about a single thing.

And yet, the woman never thought to brag about her intellect or deductive

skills. She even seemed to understand the position he was in as king.

Not only does she make a good placeholder queen, but she's also a pretty handy person to have around.

Honestly, in the beginning, Glenreed only wanted someone to take the heat off him. Perhaps he was just fortunate to be blessed with such a clever queen, although...

"She's like a totally different person..."

Glenreed wrinkled his brow.

As a noblewoman and as a figurehead queen, Laetitia was perfect.

But Glenreed knew the other side of her.

"Fluffa fluffa fluffa fluff~ Pet the fluffy babies~"

She sang that incomprehensible song to herself when petting all the other wolves.

Glenreed, in silver wolf form, had seen her acting like such a stupid little child.

Of course, she never sang around Edgar or the other humans, meaning she *did* know how embarrassing it was.

I guess I don't hate that side of her...

Laetitia stood in front of others with her pretty yet unreadable smile.

But when her guard was down, well, sometimes she was quite entertaining.

She was a girl with both the rigid expressions of a duchess and the carefree smile of a child.

Despite her role as a figurehead queen, Glenreed felt he needed to dig further into her true nature, as well as find the source of that strange scent.

"...Tomorrow, I'll find some time to watch her more in wolf form."

Just earlier, she'd agreed to forgo contact from the king.

So if he couldn't see her in human form, he could at least see her as a wolf.

That was how Glenreed chose to look at it, anyway.

Chapter 5: The Gardener Cat and Strawberry Jam

“SOOOOOO fluffyyy!!!”

Fluffa fluffa fluffa fluff!

I, Laetitia, was running my hands all over the fluffy wolf, getting my absolute fill of soft fur.

I was even starting to fluff up my words. Oh dear.

Surrounded by so much fluff, *fluff* wasn't even sounding like a real word anymore.

“This is exactly what I needed!!!”

The soft strands of fur tickled both of my palms.

With each stroke of her coat, the wolf closed her eyes in bliss, and I started to forget all my cares in the world at the same time.

Yesterday's visits to Lady Natalie and His Majesty were the first time I'd conducted any official business in days. I wanted nothing more than to play with the wolves and heal my weary soul, but sadly, they were already done with their walk by the time I got home.

My instinct to pet fuzzy creatures was in full swing. Today, finally, I got to pet all the wolf fur I wanted.

“Roooo!” cried the wolf.

She started to shove her face into me.

Right here? Is this your favorite spot?

I scratched her from the nape of her neck, down to her shoulders, and all the way down to her chest.



“Aroooooo!”

She leaned into me and enjoyed the scratches.

This female wolf, Jenna, was extremely friendly.

Some of the others were still keeping their distance, but Jenna never had any trouble approaching me. According to Edgar, the wolfkeeper, Jenna loved to be petted by humans.

On top of that, she adored the slicker brush as well. Jenna was the perfect wolf for me—I could make her so happy just by petting and brushing her.

The transmuted slicker brush seemed to be a big help for both Edgar and the wolves. He told me all about how hard it was to groom the wolves when they started shedding, but this year, he was so grateful that he had an easier way to get it done.

It was all thanks to the convenience of modern Earth appliances.

However, the wolves still had their own preferences when it came to brushings.

During the spring, many wolves seemed to enjoy it. Maybe their skin was itchy from shedding their coats. But once they were through with that, some stopped letting me brush them.

“Nah, I’m good for now, thanks,” I imagined some wolves saying as I watched them avoid me and the brush.

“More! Please brush me more!!” begged others as they nuzzled me with their heads. Jenna was the most eager of them all.

When she felt that slicker brush against her, the tension left her entire body. I could tell she loved it. And when I was done with her brushing, I loved running my hands along her soft fur too.

We called this a “win-win situation” in my past life.

“So fluffy... I could pet you forever...”

“...Never would have thought I’d envy a wolf...”

“Lucian? Did you say something?”

“No, it’s nothing at all. For a moment, I just felt my heart being stolen away by the lovely little creature.”

“I know how you feel!”

I nodded vigorously.

Wolves are scary and hard to approach at first, but their mannerisms and expressions are truly endearing.

Thanks to the loving training from Edgar and the other wolfkeepers, these wolves were a lot more like giant dogs. I felt myself getting so attached to them.

And now I’d learned that Lucian and I shared the same love of wolves. I’d expect nothing less from the man. It was common that servants and masters had similar tastes, and I greatly appreciated his enthusiasm.

I was also deeply grateful that Lucian came all the way to this land just to take care of me. With our long history, I didn’t have to hide my true self in front of him anymore, and this meant I could snuggle with the wolves all I wanted.

Thinking about it now, as much as I always publicly conducted myself in a proper manner for a duke’s daughter, there were still glimpses of my past-life personality that popped up now and then throughout my life.

In front of Lucian and the brother I was closest in age to, I often acted pretty silly, actually.

...Huh. Oh well.

Being on edge all the time wasn’t healthy. I needed a break every now and then.

Yeah. That was it.

“Fluffy little critter, so fuzzy and soft...,” I hummed to myself. I was really in that good of a mood.

It was all thanks to yesterday’s meeting with Gilbert.

When I had returned from my visit with His Majesty, I went to talk to Gilbert about two topics.

First, I wanted his help improving my chiffon cake recipe.

Second, I asked him to cut back on spices in all the meals he served me.

This second request was something I was trying to save for later.

Usually, if I asked for lighter meals, I'd only be met with resistance. That's why my plan was to befriend Gilbert and the other chefs, then slowly but surely shift to meals that used fewer heavy spices.

Though, in truth, I wanted a change, and I wanted it fast.

I learned all about the circumstances of Gilbert's firing at Lady Natalie's house. With that new information, I felt assured that Gilbert must have opinions of his own when it came to upper-class cooking.

He confirmed my suspicions when I asked him directly.

Gilbert told me he didn't hate spices and seasonings, but personally, he preferred to eat meals where the natural flavor of the ingredients was the heart of the dish.

At that point, I was able to confess that I agreed with him, and thus, Gilbert and I entered into our culinary partnership.

And fortunately for me, the chefs who worked under Gilbert in the villa didn't seem to have a problem with that line of thought either. They all had experience working with Gilbert before, so they were more or less on the same page.

The chefs at my villa hadn't been here very long, but they seemed to be doing a good job working together. Four of them were fired from Lady Natalie's villa when Gilbert was forced out of his job, and the rest resigned to follow him here to mine.

I didn't deem Gilbert very talented when it came to getting on in the world, but even so, his subordinates and colleagues all seemed very fond of the man.

Now that I thought about it, I felt very blessed that Gilbert and his chefs were the ones I met at the villa. Lady Natalie and Diaz weren't pleased with Gilbert as a chef, but for someone like me who hated food that was too rich, he was pretty much perfect.

I continued to stroke the wolf, daydreaming about all the delicious food I was

going to eat. I was humming the “Fluffy Friends Song” (lyrics and music by me) to myself, when I heard a rustling sound from the tree line.

“...She’s really just an idiot, isn’t she?”

Seeing the dumbfounded look on the silver wolf’s face, I could almost hear him directing those words toward me.

The silver wolf was already bigger than the rest of the pack, but at the moment, he looked bigger than ever. The others were slimmed down now that they’d shed their winter coats, and the silver wolf looked all the fluffier in comparison.

Maybe his winter and summer coats are very similar?

Even the other wolves looked significantly fluffier than pictures of wolves in summer coats I’d seen in Japan.

Maybe the wolves of this world were naturally fluffier than Earth wolves.

I busied myself with these thoughts, singing to myself all the while, when I felt the silver wolf’s cold stare on me.

“Humming to yourself without a care in the world... What’s got you in such a good mood?” I interpreted from the silver wolf’s blue-green eyes as he observed me.

What a fantastic glare. Thank you, you just made my day.

...I promise I’m not a masochist.

The silver wolf seemed a bit shocked, but really, all I was doing was admiring his cuteness.

If a human were to glare at me so coldly, I was sure I’d shrink away sadly.

Of course, I’d never let a human see me embarrass myself like this in the first place.

On the off chance King Glenreed or one of the other queen candidates ever caught me acting like this, I was pretty confident I’d die from shame right there on the spot.

“Hehe! I see the wolves still love you, Your Majesty.”

“Good day to you, Melvin.”

This time it was Mervin who emerged from that same tree line. I decided to ask him the question that had been lingering in my mind for a while now.

“Melvin, can you tell me this wolf’s name? I don’t have anything to call him.”

“...He doesn’t have a name.”

“Really?”

“I only call him ‘the silver wolf’ in honor of that beautiful coat. Your Majesty, if you please, you’re welcome to come up with a name for this boy here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, it’s a bit impersonal to always call him ‘the silver wolf,’ don’t you think?”

The silver wolf’s ears perked up at each point in our conversation. Those jaunty little ears were incredibly cute.

“All right, how about...Howly?”

I thought the name suited the creature’s distinct howl, and yet...

“Grrrah!”

“*Absolutely not!!*” he seemed to be responding with a snarl.

“You don’t like it? Then how about Wolfy?”

“Grah!”

“Growly?”

“Grrrrr!!”

He rejected every single one of my suggestions as soon as they were out of my mouth.

What’s wrong with my names?

Melvin just laughed, sounding particularly amused.

“This here wolf has quite a lot of pride, you see. I don’t think he cares for how ‘cute’ your suggestions are.”

“What? He can understand that?”

Melvin’s smile widened when he heard my surprise. Somehow, that expression reminded me of my oldest brother. It was a smile I just couldn’t seem to read.

“...Yes, I think he can. Even if he doesn’t understand the words, he can probably make sense of your tone and the sound of the names themselves.”

“That’s still very clever of him...”

This wolf could have been a famous, well-loved circus animal or something of the sort on Earth.

The image of the silver wolf leaping through rings of fire flashed in my mind. It actually felt right, somehow. I liked imagining it.

“Lord Aroo, the star of the show...”

“Aroooo!!”

“Good. I accept that name.”

The silver wolf lowered his head like a nod.

“Lord Aroo...?”

“Woof!!”

He responded to his name with an approving cry, at least to my ears.

...So, “Lord Aroo” it was.

“Lord Aroo, you’re such a strange wolf...”

“Roooo?!”

“I think not. You’re a stranger sort than me.”

He implied this with a cry. To me, it was only another curious gesture of his.

With a snort, Lord Aroo trotted his way over to me.

It looked like he was curious about the slicker brush, once again.

“...Would you like a brushing?”

“Gruh...”

“No, that’s not it. I just wanted to smell it.”

Lord Aroo wrinkled his nose at me.

He had seemed disinterested at first, but now, he would let me use the brush on him without hesitation. He wasn’t as friendly as Jenna or the other wolves, but he also didn’t hate the brush enough for it to send him running at first touch.

“You don’t hate the brush, but you won’t let me pet you. Shouldn’t it be the other way around...?”

With its metal bristles, I would expect the brush to have a much more intense sensation compared with a human hand.

What a strange wolf he was to still prefer the brush in the end.

Melvin seemed to be holding back laughter as he watched Lord Aroo close his eyes and allow the brushing.

I finished my work while wondering what that could be about.

“I’ll be back again, so be sure you’re ready for me.”

With a confident wave of his tail, Lord Aroo and Melvin went on their way together.

Edgar and the rest of the wolves followed a while after that. Before I went back inside, I decided to go on a brief walk of my own.

Spring was in full bloom. The bright afternoon sunshine filtered through the trees, casting lacelike shadows across the ground.

The trees surrounding my house were like a forest of their own. I loved the rich smell of all the greenery.

I was stretching my body as I walked alongside Lucian when I noticed that the grass to my right was rustling.

“A cat...?”

Lucian had placed himself in front of me protectively, but past him, I could see a tiny, fuzzy creature squirming in the grass.

The cat had a round head and vivid light-green eyes. Its coat was like a gray

tabby's, with alternating lighter and darker gray stripes in its fur.

“.....”

“.....”

Silently, I stared right into its green eyes.

...What a strange cat.

I always thought cats were supposed to hate eye contact with humans.

Don't they usually think you're trying to start a fight if you look them in the eye?

But this cat kept its gaze fixed on me. It wasn't acting upset at all, either.

Those light-green eyes were captivating, like I was looking straight at the fresh forest leaves that surrounded us.

The wind gently rustled its whiskers, while the two of us continued to stand and stare in silence.

The cat, still looking up at me, started to walk deeper into the woods. The way it kept its eyes on me as it moved felt like an invitation to follow.

“...Shall we go?”

Curious, I decided to tag along.

The cat continued to weave between the trees, ensuring we were still behind it as it moved. As we followed our four-legged guide, I caught wind of something sweet in the air.

The stronger it got, the more nostalgia filled my body.

What I saw there instantly took me back to memories of my past life.

“I can't believe it...”

The cat had led us through a small copse of trees.

Bright-red fruit sagged from the vines—something I'd never seen since I had reincarnated into this world. Their ripe surface was speckled with bumpy seeds, and each berry was in the shape of a triangle with a green stem on top.

“Strawberries...”

They were nearly identical to the ones I knew from Earth, both in appearance and in that sweet, nostalgic fragrance. The only difference I could make out was the smaller size of some of the berries.

Sprouting close to the ground, some were splattered with mud, but they were still just as easy to identify.

Can I eat these?

The sweet-and-sour scent reached my nose. I felt a sudden hunger overcome me.

I loved strawberries so much, I was even singing my little strawberry song to myself just before I died in my past life.

As I restlessly looked at the strawberries (or whatever they were), the gray tabby strolled right over to them. It sniffed at the berries, savoring the smell before digging in with its fangs.

One bite, then two—the cat gobbled down one strawberry after another, leaving red juice stains in the fur around its mouth. It left the stems scattered around on the ground once it was finished, then took to licking the juice off its fur.

*“So you *can* eat them...”*

If a cat could eat them, then so could I. Probably.

Since my body was much bigger, I figured the berries would be safe for me to eat.

I crouched down closer to the strawberries (or whatever they were), careful not to startle the tabby cat.

I cast a spell to make a tiny blade out of wind and sliced the vines, freeing all the berries. Next, I caught the tumbling fruit in my hands and then used another spell to clean the berries.

Once they were free of any dirt and mud, I checked again to confirm they were also free of bugs and mold. I took my first bite into the tip of a strawberry. Immediately, that sweet flavor filled my mouth.

“Delicious...”

I felt the slightly sour juice drip onto my tongue, leaving a refreshing taste in my mouth. The nostalgic flavor was exactly how I remembered it. The berries were incredibly delicious.

“Did you want me to try these?”

The gray tabby cat was still taking its time eating up a bundle of the berries.

It seemed this cat was a big fan of them.

“What a strange cat...,” murmured Lucian. I agreed with him on that point.

“But thanks to this cat, we were able to find strawberries out here. I owe it my gratitude.”

“Strawberries?”

Lucian cocked his head curiously.

...Oh, that's right.

I'd never once encountered strawberries under any circumstances for the seventeen years I'd lived in my birth kingdom. Naturally, Lucian wouldn't know anything about strawberries, being from the same kingdom as me.

“These fruits are called strawberries. I've seen them described in old books before.”

“I see. ‘Strawberries,’ are they? I don't know why, but I find that name kind of cute. It suits their appearance.”

“I agree! They're cute on the outside and delicious on the inside. Wonderful, don't you think?”

“Indeed. That's all very grand, but...please refrain from eating wild fruits like that, Your Majesty. You did it so casually, and you looked so happy as you ate, I found myself completely transfixed at the sight, but you could have been in real trouble had the berries been poisonous.”

“...I'm sorry. I'll be more careful.”

“No, I'm the one who should apologize for failing to warn you.”

Whoops. The mistake made guilt creep into my heart.

I was just so excited over the discovery, I couldn't help but dig in right away, but it was true the berries could have been "strawberries" in appearance only. If they were actually poisonous, I would have just put myself in a very serious situation.

In my past life, it would have been a simple case of self-destruction by the gluttonous office worker. But here, as the queen, who knew how heavy the consequences would be if I managed to get myself poisoned?

Fortunately, this fruit appeared perfectly strawberry-like in every single way, so I doubted it was poisonous...

I made a mental note to take more caution in the future.

"I'm sorry I scared you. I think Gilbert and the other chefs might know more about this fruit. What say we take some home for them?"

"That's a great idea. Here, use this."

I took his handkerchief and placed some of the strawberries inside.

As I handed the bundle back to Lucian, I noticed the gray tabby was still staring up at us. When the two of us turned to leave, the cat started to trot after us on its four little legs.

Did it get attached to me?

I reached out my hand to see for myself, but the tabby dodged my attempted petting immediately.

We continued through the forest until we reached the villa. All the way along, the cat followed behind us silently.

Maybe it wants to be adopted?

The cat continued to follow me into the house, though it kept a safe distance from me all the while.

I started to wonder if this cat was after a human snack.

I left the gray tabby on its own to poke my head into the kitchen, hoping I could find it some milk. Luckily, I happened to spot one of the younger chefs who didn't seem to be occupied with anything.

“Excuse me. Could I borrow a bit of milk, or anything else a cat might like?”

“What’s this about, Your Majesty? Have you found yourself a pet cat?”

“Well, I’m not quite sure yet... I thought milk might be a nice way to show my appreciation. There’s a metal container I made for transmutation practice that I believe I left in a corner somewhere. Do you think you could use it to make something for me?”

“Very well. Please wait here for a moment. I believe it was over here...”

The chef quickly returned with the jug of milk.

I thanked him and decided to use this opportunity for another purpose as well.

“Thank you for your help. Actually, there’s one more thing I’d like to ask of you. Is now a good time?”

“What can I do for you?”

“I found these delicious fruits in the forest. Do you know what they are?”

When I opened the handkerchief and retrieved a strawberry...

“A D-Demon Gem...?!”

The response I received was both hard to believe and also somewhat troubling.

“Demon Gem...”

As I repeated his words, various pieces of information started to float to the top of my brain.

“Beautiful gem-like fruits.”

“These berries contain poison that can cause intense pain when consumed.”

“Death can occur after ingesting only a small amount.”

“Beautiful in appearance, yet toxic to humans, much like a demon.”

“These purple berries are known as Demon Gems.”

I’d seen this name from time to time in my history books. It was a beautiful fruit that made for a deadly poison.

Elltoria had eradicated these berries decades ago due to their danger.

That meant I never got to see one in real life, but apparently, this strawberry-like fruit was the real deal.

“...Poison?”

I felt the blood in my veins turn cold.

The chef standing in front of me started to grow pale too.

Just before my shock turned to panic, the red color of the berry caught my eye.

“Wait, no! This fruit is red! Demon Gems are supposed to be purple!”

“Ah!!”

The chef’s eyes went wide. He stared straight at the crimson berry.

“...It just looks red to me... But I’ve seen that shape before. One of the chefs once brought a Demon Gem in for research, and it looked just like that...”

“I see... So this isn’t likely to be a Demon Gem. It’s the wrong color, and the poison would be affecting me by now if it was the real thing.”

“I believe so. You sure know your stuff, Your Majesty. I apologize for jumping to the wrong conclusion...”

The chef bowed his head in apology.

As I tried to calm him down, I heard a voice from behind me.

“These Poor Man’s Gems are pretty rare. I’m surprised to see you bring them here.”

““Poor Man’s Gems?””

The response had come from Gilbert. He had entered the kitchen and stopped to take a look at the red fruit.

“Gilbert, do you know this fruit?”

“Yes, I’ve had them many times. I personally like their flavor...but that appearance leaves something to be desired, so they’re not very widely consumed here. It’s quite natural for you to be unfamiliar with them, Your

Majesty.”

“This shape... Do people avoid them because they look so much like Demon Gems?”

“Indeed. The color may be different, but the size and shape are spot-on.”

Gilbert continued with the history lesson.

A few decades ago, when the Kingdom of Wolfvarte began trading goods with the southern continent, “Poor Man’s Gems” were first introduced into the land as food. The fruit was well-loved by the southern continent, but here in the west, it was a different story, due to our long history with the much-hated Demon Gems.

The Poor Man’s Gems, which resembled Demon Gems in every way but color, weren’t accepted by our continent

I could see why so many people were reluctant to take to a completely unknown food—all the more so when that food looked exactly like a poisonous plant.

It reminded me of the circumstances surrounding tomatoes back on Earth.

In my past life, tomatoes were a staple of Italian food and other Western cuisine, but it had a surprisingly shallow history in Europe itself.

During the Age of Discovery, tomatoes were first brought to Europe via South America, but the people of the time didn’t think much of the fruit. Tomatoes were tasty and nutritious, but they had a problematic appearance.

At that time, the belladonna plant was feared around Europe for its poisonous properties.

I’d seen the fruit of the belladonna plant in pictures before, and it was dark, glossy, and round, much like a tomato. For that reason, tomatoes were avoided as food for a long time to come.

“...I see. So that’s why these red fruits are called ‘Poor Man’s Gems.’”

“What do you mean?” the chef asked inquisitively.

“It’s about necessity. These fruits are hated for their similarity to Demon

Gems, but if they're all you have, you'd be forced to eat them to avoid starving, right? For a hungry person, struggling with poverty, these berries are as valuable as gems, hence the name. I would guess it's meant as a bit of a joke, yes?"

"That's correct. I'd expect nothing less from you, Your Majesty."

Gilbert met my gaze and answered with a compliment. I was glad.

"The two fruits are often confused for each other, so most people destroy the Poor Man's Gems immediately upon discovery. It seems to grow well in Wolfvartian soil, so they sometimes appear in the wild. During famines, the impoverished have been known to eat them, and I've heard that's where it got the nickname."

"If it's a nickname, then that means there's a proper name as well?"

"Gilvieure Gimavinna Gabunne."

Was that some sort of spell?

Or so I thought for a moment, but that appeared to be the official name.

"Gilvieure Gimavinna Gabunne... That's quite the tongue twister."

"Indeed. Most people don't memorize that name as quickly as you, Your Majesty."

Memorizing the complicated names of hundreds of aristocrats was another facet of the rigorous education I received from my brothers.

"I heard the name means 'crimson blessing' in the native language of the south, but no one uses that name here. 'Poor Man's Gem' is the norm on this continent."

"I didn't know that... Then, in that case, I'd like to call these fruits 'strawberries.'"

"Strawberries?"

"That's right. I remember seeing these red fruits referred to as 'strawberries' in a book I read many years ago. 'Gilvieure Gimavinna Gabunne' is long and hard to pronounce correctly, and the nickname 'Poor Man's Gems' doesn't have

very pleasant origins, so would you agree that 'strawberry' is a better name altogether?"

"I would. It still sounds a bit unfamiliar to me, but it's not hard to say, so I'll follow your lead, Your Majesty."

He repeated it three times: "Strawberry. Strawberry. Strawberry."

Gilbert, a grown man, was muttering the word *strawberry* to himself with extreme intensity. It was slightly amusing.

"Queen Laetitia, where exactly did you find these strawberries? I've never heard of them growing in the woods around the palace."

"I followed a cat who led me to them."

"A cat?"

"Have a look for yourself. Do you see the gray-striped cat by the door, peering into the kitchen?"

The cat blinked its light-green eyes at us, observing the humans. I tried once again to approach it, but the tabby was adamant in keeping distance between us.

Gilbert nodded as if he'd come to understand everything now.

"I see... My queen, would you be so kind as to let me borrow one of your strawberries?"

"By all means. Do you think it will make for good bait?"

The gray tabby was still on high alert around us.

I couldn't imagine there was anything that could lure the creature in our direction. However...

"Well, that was quite the success..."

"What a simple creature," Lucian whispered quietly, just loud enough for only me to hear.

Gilbert was crouched down with a strawberry in one hand. The cat's whiskers twitched curiously. This time, each of Gilbert's steps forward wasn't met with a retreat. The cat's only concern seemed to be that single strawberry he was

holding out.

The tabby cat took step after slow step toward the strawberry. Just as it was about to lean in for a bite, Gilbert raised the berry up in the air.

And then, as if its body could meet any challenge in following that strawberry, the cat stood up on its hind legs.

“What...?”

Trot. Trot. Trot.

The gray tabby was walking upright, following Gilbert and the strawberry around the room. Its gait was perfectly human. It took one step after another without any sign of wavering.

“It’s...not a cat?”

Cats don’t walk on two legs.

Even if they could, it shouldn’t be able to move more than a small distance. The cats I knew of this world were no different.

“I thought so. This is a Gardener Cat.”

“A Gardener Cat... Aren’t they a kind of Mythical Beast?”

Mythical Beasts.

These are creatures much rarer than beastfolk or demons. Mythical Beasts possess magic powers of their own, which give them certain mysterious abilities. I’d never actually seen one before, but even dragons and griffins existed in this world and were of the same mythical variety.

Now that I knew I was reborn into a world of fantasy, I had been hoping to see one in real life at some point in my life. This unexpected encounter with a Mythical Beast wasn’t what I was expecting at all.

“Gardener Cats are a very rare form of Mythical Beast in this land. They have the power to accelerate the growth of all plants. If a flower would normally take over a year to grow and bloom, these creatures can accomplish that in only a few days, from what I’ve heard of them.”

“And yet, it’s so small. How impressive.”

“They may look like regular cats, but they certainly earn the title of ‘Mythical Beast.’ Unfortunately, those powers, combined with their charming appearance, made them a prime hunting target hundreds of years ago. Now, they hardly ever show themselves around people, save for a few beastfolk.”

I wasn’t surprised to hear this.

Mythical Beasts, who often possessed both useful powers and appealing looks, were often hunted to extinction by humans. These days, the only types that remained were the ones who were tough enough to survive against humans, or those that lived in uninhabited areas, or creatures skilled in mimicry.

Aside from walking upright, the Gardener Cats resembled normal cats in every way. Perhaps they disguised themselves as cats to avoid being hunted by humans.

“...Then why did this Gardener Cat reveal itself to me?”

“Maybe it wanted to eat the strawberry?”

“What do you mean? I watched it eat strawberries just a bit ago...”

“Well, some Gardener Cats are said to be little gourmets, so to speak. They like to offer to humans the plants they grow, hoping to receive a meal out of that plant in return.”

“A meal...?”

In other words, this Gardener Cat wanted me to use the strawberries to cook with? But the people of this kingdom hated strawberries too much to even think of eating them.

Was this cat wandering around, looking for the one person who would use them in a meal? When it met me, someone who didn’t hesitate to eat one, maybe it finally saw its chance.

“It followed me, hoping I would make something with its strawberries...?”

So this cat knew it could be hunted by humans, but the desire for strawberry foods overruled all that?

This catlike Mythical Beast, who walked on its hind legs, appeared to be out

for a taste of fine dining.



WE'D managed to figure out that the gray tabby was a Gardener Cat—a type of Mythical Beast.

We decided we wanted to observe its powers for ourselves after that, so we headed into the woods. The four of us—Lucian, Gilbert, the Gardener Cat, and myself—traveled as one group.

Eventually, the trees opened up to reveal a clearing, and with it, the strawberry patches. Gilbert's mouth fell open. He was clearly impressed.

"I've never seen it myself, but I've heard that strawberries are grown differently than Demon Gems."

"How are Demon Gems grown?"

"They grow at the very tip of short trees, but these strawberries are different. Their plants are close to the ground, and the berries grow on the ends of vines."

"I see. So it's unlikely anyone would mistake Demon Gems for strawberries in the wild."

This was good news indeed. If the actual appearance of the berries was the only similar aspect, there was less of a chance that someone would mistake the two.

"The strawberries on all three of these plants look ready to eat. I believe they're supposed to be at peak ripeness a bit later in the season, so the Gardener Cat must have grown these itself."

These cats, with their methods of artificial growth, were truly amazing creatures.

Wanting to see such power for myself, I reached into my breast pocket and took out a small glass bottle. Inside were the seeds I'd taken from one of the other berries.

By putting the surface of the fruit into water and stirring, I was able to separate out the actual seeds. Then I placed them in salt water for a while, resulting in sturdy seeds that were well packed.

In Japan, it was normal to grow strawberries by diverting the roots of the parent plant, but I couldn't find any such roots on the plant in front of me, so I decided to use seeds instead.

I dug into the dirt a bit, placed a seed down, and covered it back up. When I looked at the Gardener Cat, it approached the seed, seeming to understand me.

"Oh, it stood up."

Now standing upright, the Gardener Cat stretched its front legs out toward the seed. I could see its round paws and the black lumps sticking out just slightly.

"Its paw pads are glowing..."

Ultimate Toe Bean Power!!

Stupid made-up terms came to mind.

A faint light took form in its paws and poured out into the ground, causing the dirt to shake and a green sprout to emerge from within. It was only as big as the tip of my finger at first, but the longer we watched, the bigger the sprout grew.

Then leaves began to appear, and the vines drooped heavily with weight. It was already as big as the original strawberry plant.

The cat finally dropped its paws over the now-grown strawberries. It approached me and started to tug at the hem of my dress.

What does it want?

I picked the tabby up off the ground and felt the cat cling to my chest. I wrapped my arms around it tighter. The creature closed its eyes and leaned its weight against me.

"It's sleeping..."

The Gardener Cat was curled up perfectly in my arms, occasionally twitching its whiskers.

Through my dress, I felt the limp, warm creature resting peacefully.

Did that spell tire it out?

Begging for a tasty treat. Taking a nice nap in the middle of the day.

In appearance, wariness, and spontaneity, this creature resembled a cat in every way.



I walked back home to the villa, carrying the wonderful little furball in my arms.

Once I arrived, I set the Gardener Cat down on a cushion to sleep, then headed for the kitchen.

I was ready to make something with my new fresh strawberries. I wanted a meal that could also serve as thanks to the cat for its generous gift.

“Those are Demon Gems...”

“She’s not going to eat them, right?!”

“You’ve got it all wrong. They’re strawberries!”

“Strawberries?”

“That’s what Gilbert called them.”

“Are they edible?”

“Hmm, I’m not so sure about this...”

The kitchen staff were gathered around me to observe.

They were scared of the perceived “Demon Gems,” and yet, as chefs, they were intrigued at the same time.

I was eager to have them try a dish made with strawberries for the first time. Hopefully, my plan would be a success, and they would all come to love that delicious strawberry flavor.

If I was the only one cooking, I wouldn’t be able to test out very many methods with trial and error. The way I saw it, the most efficient thing for me to do was get the rest of the chefs interested in using the strawberries like I was.

I knew exactly what I needed to make too.

The chefs’ reluctance to try strawberries was all due to their appearance. They looked exactly like the poisonous Demon Gems.

So to start, I'd make the strawberries lose their shape entirely.

"A copper pot is best for strawberry jam."

Luckily, I'd already made one in advance with transmutation. I usually carried out most of my transmutation with iron, but I still practiced with other materials on occasion.

Today's copper pot was simple enough, but someday, I wanted to attempt something as challenging as porcelain cookware. Transmutation work required trial and error to master. I still had a lot of learning to do.

"First, we have to prepare the strawberries to eat..."

I ran them under water, removed each stem, and started slicing the berries into small sections.

Personally, I enjoyed strawberry jam made with larger chunks of fruit, but my goal for today was to hide the natural shape of the berries.

I placed the sliced berries in the pot and squeezed lemon juice over the top.

To be sure the chefs could taste the strawberries' natural sweetness, I wasn't going to add any extra sugar. This meant the jam wouldn't keep as well, but since the strawberries were very fresh, the sweetness shouldn't be an issue.

Next, I placed the pot over a strong flame.

The trick to making good jam is to get it boiling almost right away. This usually preserves the flavor of the strawberries and gives them a stronger scent.

This was another reason why I chose to use a copper pot. Copper is a good conductor of heat and can reach an even temperature in a short amount of time. It's the perfect material for making jam.

"Good. Now I'll turn the heat down..."

I carefully scooped out all the foam formed from the boiling mixture and then placed it in a bowl on its own instead of simply throwing it away. In my mind, I was imagining using the foam for something like a lightly flavored strawberry drink.

I let the mixture simmer for a while, stirring it continuously with a wooden

spatula, careful not to let it burn. The more I stirred, the more glimpses I caught of the copper pot underneath the jam.

I think it's just about ready.

I scooped out a bit of jam with the spatula and dropped it into a cup of water. The jam just sank to the bottom of the glass and showed no sign of dissolving in the water.

This test meant the jam was the perfect consistency—not too dry, but not too diluted.

I removed the pot from the flames, waited for it to cool, then poured all the jam into a glass jar. While it cooled to room temperature, I made myself busy by cleaning out the pot, when I felt someone's eyes on my back.

“.....”

Staaare.

The Gardener Cat had appeared at the kitchen door with its eyes fixed on me.

The smell of the strawberry jam must have woken it up.

I could feel its silent demands weighing on me already. *“Feed me this instant!!”*

This Gardener Cat didn't appear to meow like regular cats. Instead, it preferred the quiet method of begging.

I thought I could at least pass the time by petting the cat, but once again, it made its escape before I could even touch it.

It had just fallen sound asleep in my arms, and now it wouldn't even let me near. The heart of a cat is truly an enigma.

I stayed like that for a while, with the tiny source of pressure still locked on me, just out of reach, until it was time to continue.

Now that the jam was cool, there was no point in waiting to eat it. I reached in and scooped out a portion with my spoon. The thick heap of jam glistened under the light.

I'd always thought of strawberries as aesthetically pleasing fruit, but they

were transformed into beautiful gems like little rubies as a jam.

I took my first bite. Immediately, the sour-sweet scent reached my nose.

It was thick and velvety, but I especially loved the occasional solid chunk of strawberry I encountered. I hadn't added much sugar, so the taste was actually more refreshing than anything else. I felt like I could eat it all on its own.

"....."

Yes, it was delicious, but hard to enjoy with the constant stare coming from behind me.

"Hurry up and give me jam!" the Gardener Cat was silently begging me.

I scooped more jam from the glass jar and placed it on a small dish. I set the dish down on the floor, but the cat just stood and sniffed at the jam, making no attempt to actually eat it.

"Don't you want to try it...?"

The cat looked up at me and started to motion with its right front paw, like it was trying to scoop up water. It kept repeating the motion, clearly trying to convey something, until it finally clicked in my mind.

"...A spoon?"

I could hardly believe it, but still, I placed the spoon down on the plate. To my shock, the Gardener Cat reached its paws out immediately.

"Whoa...!"

It managed to grip the utensil with the soles of both paws.

The Gardener Cat was now holding the spoon with perfect form.

Somehow, it even looked pleased with itself for that accomplishment.

Next, the cat happily turned the spoon toward the jam. I watched as that first spoonful disappeared into its mouth.



“Meow?!”

An adorable little sound erupted from the Gardener Cat.

I was so delighted to finally hear its first cry. The cat continued to gobble down spoonful after spoonful, appearing deeply pleased with my offering.

Little by little, the cat polished off all the jam that had been on the plate.

Once it finished licking the spoon clean of the last morsels of jam...

“Thank you for the meal.”

The cat meowed at me once more, as if to show its appreciation, then drew closer.

Wait, am I getting a reward? Is it letting me pet it?

I watched as the cat made its way over to my feet, curled up into a little ball, and immediately fell asleep. When it's tired from growing strawberries, it takes a nap. When its belly is full of strawberry jam, it takes another nap.

This little gourmet and its adorable toe beans never held back when it came to its desires.

I picked up the Gardener Cat, still out cold in a deep sleep, and took it to the couch in my bedroom, taking a minute to stroke its soft fur along the way. Once I'd given it a brief petting, I returned to the kitchen.

It was time for the chefs to give my strawberry jam a try.

“Oh, this is good.”

“Hmm, couldn't it be a bit sweeter?”

“I like how it's kind of sour at the same time.”

“But this came from those fruits that look just like ‘Demon Gems’...”

“Shh! Don't bring that up.”

“Promise you won't talk about that. Just accept delicious food for what it is.”

“They'd actually be delicious if I didn't know what they looked like beforehand.”

“Actually, I think I’m even starting to like the shape now.”

“Nothing’s more important than a good flavor, after all.”

“Agreed!!” came the other four voices at once.

By the sound of that, it appeared the chefs were satisfied overall with the taste of the strawberry jam. Some wanted it to be sweeter, but they might be won over simply by adding more sugar to the jam or eating it with something creamy or sweet.

After that, the last obstacle would be the shape of the strawberries themselves.

I’d eaten the jam in front of the chefs to prove that it wasn’t poisonous.

But the looks on their faces after that hadn’t been very encouraging. Now that they had tried it for themselves, though, their expressions were much more positive. This was proof that the actual flavor was satisfactory.

It seemed to be erasing their prejudice toward the shape issue as well. I would continue to tackle that obstacle by cooking even more strawberry dishes for them.

“And I need to cook up some offerings for the Gardener Cat too.”

For the sake of the Gardener Cat and for the sake of my own strawberry desires, it was a challenge I had to take on.



“HEAVY...”

For the past few mornings, I’d been awakening from sleep to the sensation of a weight on my chest.

I forced my eyelids open and looked down.

“.....”

A pair of light-green eyes were staring back at me.

The Gardener Cat’s gaze was fixed on me as she sat on my chest, as if to demand that I get out of bed immediately.

“Good morning, Berry.”

I’d named the Gardener Cat “Strawberry” after her favorite food but called her “Berry” as a nickname. Fifteen days had already passed since our first encounter.

I didn’t know if it was just thanks to my strawberry jam, but Berry had decided to settle down here at the villa with me.

Though she looked exactly like any other cat, this was a Mythical Beast perched on my chest.

She always seemed tired after spending her days acting like a cat, so I started inviting her into my bedroom at night. Perhaps liking the bed I had prepared for her, she began to sleep in my room every night.

I rang the bell by my bedside to summon a maid. Soon, one appeared in my room with a cup of black tea and a small bowl of strawberry jam, among other treats.

“Come here, Berry. It’s finally breakfast time.”

Once the maid left the room, I held out the bowl for Berry, and she raced over to me impatiently.

In her left paw was a small spoon she’d hidden in a corner of the room.

I’d transmuted her this perfect cat-sized little spoon earlier.

Gripping her precious tool, Berry began to dig into the strawberry jam, once again getting to enjoy her favorite treat. Cats may be carnivores, but Gardener Cats apparently preferred plant-based foods in general. They also had a few strange traits that made them resemble actual plants themselves.

First, Gardener Cats didn’t seem to produce any waste.

Their food was converted through magic, or something of the sort, never to leave their bodies as excrement.

The second trait was their need to be exposed to sunlight.

Maybe a few days without it was fine, but after a few weeks without any, the Gardener Cats were said to break down and die.

They looked just like any other cat on the outside, but I wondered if they were actually conducting photosynthesis or something like that.

Berry often took naps in front of the sunnier windows, whenever she wasn't busy. It made her look exactly like a cat craving warm, sunny spots in the house to curl up in, so it didn't give away her status as a Mythical Beast.

Berry finished her jam around the same time I finished my tea.

Instead of water to wash down her meal, Berry drank strawberry milk made with some remnants of the jam.

She set the cup back down carefully, then left to go to the window.

Under the light of the sun, the strawberry leaves seemed to glow with life.

Inside the flower pots that lined the windowsill were the roots of different strawberry plants.

Berry had grown these roots with her own magic.

It was possible to use a Gardener Cat's powers to make a plant reach all the way to the fruit-bearing stage.

However, to make a plant bear fruit, Berry apparently had to use quite a lot of her energy. The most efficient use of her powers was to grow the roots to a certain point but stop a bit before the berries were formed.

Fortunately, it was the right season for strawberries, so they would grow on their own after that. Five plants here at home and around ten plants in the woods were starting to show small green fruits already.

Berry was still busy with making more strawberry plants, so our harvest would only increase with time.

"I'm looking forward to seeing them grow."

After ten more days, the plants should bear plump red strawberries.

Excited about the prospect of the approaching strawberry festival, I dressed myself for the coming day.

I took some time to read over documents relating to the management of the villa and stamped a few papers, and then, it was time to head to the kitchen.

“Gilbert, let’s work on another chiffon cake today.”

“I’m at your service. I think we’ll finally get to see the results we’ve been waiting for.”

Gilbert nodded with more force than I was used to seeing from him.

After some planning, the two of us set out on our next chiffon cake endeavor.

Together, we were testing a few tiny adjustments to the amount of sugar and when exactly we added it. There were more parts of the process we tweaked along the way as we went.

Each change was small, but they added up into a huge transformation.

We took the cake out of its mold and it was perfectly smooth, without a single rough patch along the surface.

“How delicious...”

The chiffon cake was smooth like silk in my mouth, with a texture both light and moist.

The sweetness hadn’t been lost either. It was an elegant taste

Between the original recipe I knew from before, and the changes brought on by the different tools and ingredients in this world, the chiffon cake had been perfected.

I could even imagine our cake selling as a gourmet product if we brought it to Japan.

“We did it, Your Majesty...!!”

“We sure did. Thank you, Gilbert. This is all because of the effort you and the other chefs put in.”

He gave me a shy smile in response.

The other chefs had been watching over our efforts too, as if to bless our work.

Gilbert really was an amazing chef.



His first time ever laying eyes on a chiffon cake was only twenty days ago now, and yet he had immediately grasped its unique qualities as a cake and even how the recipe could be improved as well.

The cake was already looking much better than it had when we first started. If I were on my own, I doubt I would have ever made it this far at all.

Both Gilbert's knack and passion for cooking were not to be underestimated.

"A chiffon cake like this will be a fitting present for the ceremony in five days, don't you think?"

"Absolutely. With this unique texture and the sweet flavor, it will make a fine gift for His Majesty."

It sounded like I'd earned Gilbert's seal of approval.

In five days from now, it would be the king's birthday.

Here in Wolfvarte, royal birthdays are celebrated with gatherings of influential people inside the main palace. On top of that, whatever birthday gift you offer is seen as a physical valuation of your own status.

And here I was, a newcomer in the kingdom.

While I wanted to give a memorable present that wouldn't be looked down on by the guests, I didn't want to spend too much money either, so I decided to cook something for His Majesty's birthday instead.

Most cakes in this kingdom are the heavier kinds of desserts like pound cakes. On top of that, their shapes are typically round or rectangular. I knew that a doughnut-shaped cake with a hole in the middle would be a rare sight. It made my chiffon cake a brand-new experience, both in visuals and in texture.

I wasn't sure if the taste itself would be to everyone's liking, but it should make quite an impact for the other two aspects alone.

...Another reason I became so immersed in cooking lately was because I'd planned on gifting His Majesty a dish of my own making for his birthday.

Sure, it was a fun hobby, but it was nice to get something practical out of it too.

Since about 80 percent of my cooking was for my own entertainment, I felt like that much was acceptable.

I would be presenting this chiffon cake as a cocreator, along with Gilbert and the other chefs.

Hopefully, that would help boost Gilbert's reputation, if even just a little.

Still eating the chiffon cake, I gave a deep nod at that thought.

Suddenly...

"Y-Your Majesty, this is bad!!"

One of my chefs, his face looking ghastly pale, had just rushed into the kitchen.

Chapter 6: The Birthday Party Plot

ONE of the younger chefs rushed into the room.

He wasn't supposed to be on duty today, so the man was dressed in simple beige clothes from head to toe.

The chef took one look at the chiffon cake and froze.

"I knew it...!"

"What's the matter? You seem quite upset."

"I've just seen it! Lady Natalie went and—"

"Pardon me, Your Majesty, but a guest has arrived for you."

Borgan, the butler, entered the kitchen at that moment.

I guess it's just one urgent matter after another today.

Borgan was a kind and capable man, and he always respected my cooking hobby. Normally, he would always wait for me outside the kitchen if he had anything minor to discuss.

If he came straight to me for something, then it must be important.

I left the kitchen and began to ask Borgan, with his dog ears now slumped, what was going on, when...

"Oh, there you are, Your Majesty."

"...Diaz."

Diaz had arrived with Giran, her head chef and one of her supporters. The woman smirked as soon as she saw me.

"Your Majesty, I know your title is in name only, but should the queen really present herself in such attire?"

I was wearing a simple dress with an apron on top and had my hair tied up so

that I could cook. She was right that this wasn't a suitable outfit for a queen, but I didn't want to hear that from someone who had shown up in my home without invitation.

"I see your point, although I think it's a fitting outfit in the presence of such an impolite guest. I don't have time to entertain your sudden visit, and I still have yet to receive an apology for your previous treatment."

"Apology? We're the ones waiting to hear some gratitude from you, Your Majesty."

"Oh my. What could you mean by that?"

"See for yourself."

Giran, the chef, uncovered the serving tray in his hand.

"A chiffon cake?!"

I had seen this yellow cake before. The exterior was a little rough, but the doughnut-shaped chiffon cake was exactly like mine.

"Your Majesty! That's it! Lady Natalie's people have been passing around that cake! I couldn't stand it, so I went to complain to her myself, but she wouldn't hear me out...!" I heard the young chef run up to me from behind. "They've stolen your chiffon cake, my queen!!"

"Stolen? What evidence do you have of such a scandalous claim?"

"What?! Don't be ridiculo— Your Majesty?!"

I stopped the young chef and physically put myself between him and Diaz.

I understood why he wanted to vent his anger, but in the end, this man was a commoner. Lashing out at a noblewoman like Diaz could land him some form of punishment, unfair as it may be.

"May I ask what's going on? That cake looks identical to the one my staff and I created."

"You're mistaken. We invented this cake at my home, held a tea party so everyone could enjoy it for themselves, and now we're going around gifting our neighbors with the leftovers. It's merely a coincidence and nothing more."

“Do you really think I’m going to just accept that?”

“How unfortunate. I could go as far as to ask if you were the one who copied our cake first, hmm? The reason I came here today was to suggest you fire your poor-mannered chef here, who just accosted us with baseless accusations of theft.”

“Well, unfortunately, I have no intention of letting this man go,” I replied bluntly. I then turned my gaze to Giran. “How can you even call yourself a chef? Don’t you have any shame, stealing someone else’s recipe like that?”

“What are you talking about? Trying to shift the blame, are we?”

“...Are you actually accusing me of stealing *your* recipe?”

“Am I wrong? Your head chef, Gilbert, was fired from our kitchen, and now he’s probably trying to get revenge by stealing our recipe.”

“...You’re the lowest of the low.”

I didn’t even try to hide my contempt.

I knew I could never respect Giran when I learned he enjoyed cooking in ways that were upsetting to beastfolk. But I never expected him to resort to blatantly stealing recipes like this. What a terrible disgrace of a chef, and a human.

My days in the royal villa had all been peaceful so far. In fact, I could hardly remember the last time I felt such disgust with another person. What irritated me all the more was how I couldn’t deny that Giran’s argument was persuasive.

If anyone who didn’t know Gilbert heard about this, Giran’s story about the fired chef’s act of revenge would appear to hold water. It didn’t help that I had been spending so much time confined to the house. No one outside of the servants and I could prove that it was our cake. We were backed into a corner.

“...I heard that Lady Natalie would be having a tea party for her friends and family today. You presented the chiffon cake at that event to prove that it was your creation, is that correct?”

“Of course. We wanted our guests to enjoy our newest cake, and we even shared it with commoners, as an act of compassion. There are dozens of witnesses who know the cake came from us.”

She'd called it "an act of compassion." What a joke.

Diaz's only goal was to create as many witnesses as possible.

That was why my chef had caught wind of the situation and rushed here to inform me of the stolen cake.

"So, you're the inventor of the chiffon cake? I can't imagine that's all you wanted out of this. In five days, you're going to give His Majesty a chiffon cake for his birthday, aren't you?" I ventured.

"Why yes, we are. The chiffon cake is our creation. It appears you've come up with something that strongly resembles ours, but I'd strongly advise you against giving it to His Majesty. You certainly wouldn't want to be seen as a plagiarist in the eyes of so many, would you?"

On that note of feigned kindness, Diaz turned to leave.

"Well, then. We're very busy back at home, preparing for the birthday festivities, so I'll be on my way now. I'm looking forward to seeing your birthday present for His Majesty. You'll have to come up with it in five short days, though."

So that was her plan.

A birthday present is an expression of the sender's own class and status. If I, a newcomer to the kingdom, was unable to come up with a proper gift for the king, I would be belittled and ridiculed for it.

At that point, I had already turned down an offer from Diaz and Lady Natalie to back their attempt at taking the crown. If I wasn't on their side, that made me their enemy. They wanted to weaken my own standing before they tried to obtain any power themselves.

"Hmph. This is what happens when you hire someone like Gilbert as a head chef. What an eyesore to have in your kitchen all day, that know-it-all. He should have quit this line of work altogether, but I guess he just doesn't know his place."

That grating sound was the voice of Giran, the man who always had to have the last word. He wasn't even trying to hide his hatred of Gilbert anymore.

I couldn't quite figure out why a chef like him would participate in this whole plagiarism scheme, but now it made sense.

"...You were jealous of Gilbert, weren't you?"

"Excuse me? What are you talking about?"

"He's younger and more skilled than you, which is why you went behind his back to have Lady Natalie send him away. But when you learned I had hired him as head chef, it ate at you, didn't it? And now you've resorted to stealing a recipe to take away from his achievements."

"...! Don't be ridiculous!" His face was turning a deep red. My suspicions were confirmed. "I'm going home too!"

Giran made a dash for the door. After he was gone, all that was left was his forgotten chiffon cake, or whatever it deserved to be called.

"What do we do, Your Majesty?" Gilbert murmured, still in shock. He was always a pale man, but right then, he was as white as a ghost. "No apology would be enough for causing your chiffon cake to be stolen..."

"It's not your fault, Gilbert. Giran and that whole group just like to play dirty."

"But, still..."

"First, what say we give this cake a try to see how it tastes? We can discuss what to do after that."

I was confident they wouldn't have done anything as foolish as poisoning it.

My grudge was with Giran, not the cake itself.

I busied myself with getting out the silverware and dishes, and we dug into the dessert together.

"It's quite... Well, no, it's not very good. But it's not so bad either."

"...I agree."

Gilbert and I were on the same page.

The flavor itself was fine, but what it lacked was the light and fluffy texture that was characteristic of a chiffon cake. It wasn't soft at all—in fact, it was a bit dry.

Actually, it reminded me of a failed attempt of my own to make a chiffon cake in my past life. I was only in elementary school at the time, and I forgot to add oil to the batter before putting it in the oven.

“I thought the texture and taste of ours was better, Your Majesty...”

“The real problem is that they beat us in presenting it to the public...” I sighed.

Compared with the one made under Gilbert’s instructions, as well as the delicious cakes I knew from my past life, Giran’s attempt was not a success.

But still, in this world, its texture and shape were unique enough on their own. A slightly different texture probably wouldn’t be enough to prove the recipe was stolen.

“I don’t want to roll over and let them win... But seeing as how they took the first move, I’m not sure how we can best them in this situation.”

They’d been so aggressive about it too. However, losing wasn’t an option. A tie wouldn’t be acceptable to me either. If I was going to publicly accuse them of plagiarism, I needed something that would ensure I ended up the victor.

I would be leaving this kingdom after two years, but Gilbert and the other chefs would live out the rest of their lives here. With Gilbert being fired from Lady Natalie’s kitchen and the others coming under suspicion of plagiarism, it would be difficult for them to continue to work in the same industry.

“Your Majesty, if you’re experiencing any concern for my sake, I don’t want you to worry about something so trivial. Please expose Giran for what he is to the whole world.”

“No, I can’t do that, Gilbert. If we lose that battle, my reputation as the queen will take a beating. With that on the line, I have no choice but to let them have the chiffon cake. For his birthday, I’ll send His Majesty some textiles from my homeland instead.”

I already had an alternate present prepared in case our improvements to the chiffon cake recipe didn’t pan out in time.

Unfortunately, the textiles would be a much less impactful present in comparison, and more than anything else, I didn’t want to let the cake I made

with Gilbert be stolen away like that.

While I was busy deciding on the next move, I noticed the gloomy faces of the chefs surrounding me.

...This doesn't look good.

The air was harsh and heavy, but not just because of the plagiarism.

...A traitor.

Someone taught Giran how to make that sponge cake.

Most likely, the culprit was one of the chefs here in this very room.

"Everyone? Let's not look at each other with suspicion. It's also possible someone from the outside came to spy on us here, so I'll check in with Edgar, the boy who walks the wolves around our villa, and see if he's noticed anything unusual. It's just about time for dinner, so please, return to your posts in the kitchen."

This seemed to lighten the mood.

I knew that the chefs didn't want to suspect their colleagues either.

Now that they were considering the possibility of an outsider, along with receiving orders from me to follow, they seemed to be much more relaxed.

Conveniently for me, Edgar would be here to walk the wolves soon.

I exited the house and planted myself in the shadow of a tree, taking some time to get my thoughts in order.

Should I still send His Majesty a sponge cake for his birthday? How can I prove that the recipe was stolen? Who exactly stole it in the first pl— "Grah!!"

"EEK?!"

A wolf's pouty whine was suddenly right up against my ear.

"*Don't you dare ignore me,*" Lord Aroo seemed to insist as he wrinkled his nose at me, looking annoyed. He sat himself down beside me.

"You startled me..."

I was so lost in thought, I guess I didn't even notice Lord Aroo walking up to

me.

“What brings you here so early today?” I asked him, knowing there would be no response.

Lord Aroo always appeared a bit after Edgar and the other wolves did. But most days, he didn’t show up at all.

“Nothing special...”

He looked away, as if to dodge the question.

Lord Aroo lay down with his belly on the ground. He kept a bit of distance from me.

I stared at the wolf’s fur as it swayed in the breeze, until his blue-green eyes were staring back at mine.

“You look upset. Did something happen?” they seemed to ask me.

I wondered if he was suspicious, since he could tell something was wrong with me.

“I guess I’m a bit down... Well, to put it more accurately, I let my guard down.”

The words came out one by one. I could feel my emotions start to sort themselves out inside me.

Gilbert blamed himself for the stolen cake, but it was my responsibility to bear as the head of this household.

Recipe plagiarism was something I’d seen in Japan during my past life. That meant I could only blame myself for not taking the right precautions to stop this.

Of course, the actual thieves were the ones at fault. Not everyone in the world is a good person. But even as a placeholder, my title of queen meant I needed to keep myself out of trouble like this.

“It’s so depressing...”

What bothered me all the more was how happy my life had been in the villa before now.

Everyone in my home here seemed nice, which made the idea that one of them could be a traitor so dreadful.

Maybe the culprit was forced into it somehow...

But I didn't have a clue who did it in the first place, so I couldn't begin to guess their motives.

There was nowhere for me to turn. I felt my mood spiraling into worse and worse territory.

While I was busy whining to myself, Lord Aroo suddenly stood up.

Is he leaving already?

But before I could think any further, I felt something soft against my hand.

"What...? Lord Aroo?"

Lord Aroo was pressing his head up against my palm.



“Can I pet you...?”

“You look upset, so I’ll let you pet me, but just for today.”

He gave a little nod of his head. It looked like a nod of approval.

The wolf’s smooth fur tickled my hand with each stroke.

“So soft...”

I buried my fingers deeper into that satisfying texture. I was gently petting his silver fur everywhere—from his head to the spots behind his ears and the scruff of his neck.

My fingers took in the slight chill of his coat, as well as the bounty of soft fur itself.

“This feels so nice...”

I was completely transfixed in petting the creature.

Lord Aroo seemed a little on edge, but he stayed put and let me continue. He was exactly as soft as he always looked, and I couldn’t get enough of his fur on my hands.

My worries started to melt away.

I was so happy—both to experience petting this animal, with its incredibly thick coat, and also to know that Lord Aroo had allowed it to happen for the very first time.

“Thank you. How about I give you a nice brushing to show my appreciation?”

Having sated my fluff addiction, I felt like some of the weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

I took out the slicker brush and began to groom Lord Aroo, when...

“Hmm?”

A niggling idea in the back of my mind began to rise to the surface.

I stopped brushing and silently racked my brain.

The slicker brush in my right hand was something I made with transmutation...

“...Ah!!”

Eureka.

I stared at the brush to be sure I was on the right track.

“This might be what I need...”

A way to prove the plagiarism for good.

I had stumbled upon something that might be the ultimate, clearest form of proof that everyone would be able to see for themselves.

“Yes...! I can do it...! I can finish the fight they started...! I’m gonna get them now...!”

I clenched my fists in victory. Lord Aroo looked on with what could only be interpreted as disgust.

“What’s with her? Now she’s happy all of a sudden?”

I just smiled back at the wolf, who was staring at me suspiciously, and then I stood up.

“Lord Aroo, thanks to you, I think things might turn out all right!!”

I have to be fast.

First, I needed to ask Edgar if he’d seen anyone suspicious recently. There were a million more things that would come after that.

My solution was going to be a race against time.

I had to share my idea with Gilbert and the others. After that, there were even more things I needed to quickly get to.

“Thank you, Lord Aroo! I love you!”

Giving the wolf my utmost thanks, I gave him one last pat, then raced back toward my house, leaving Lord Aroo there in the yard.



“I was just trying to be nice to the girl, but she didn’t have to pet me that much, did she...?”

Glenreed stood in his room, putting the silver locks of his hair into place with

his fingers.

He had heard there was some kind of dispute between Natalie's head chef and Laetitia's head chef, and that people from Natalie's house went to visit Laetitia's villa.

This was suspicious enough for Glenreed to pay Laetitia a visit in his wolf form.

He arrived a bit too late, and Natalie's people had already left the villa, but he found Laetitia and her servant loitering around in the front yard.

Laetitia seemed much more depressed than he'd ever seen her.

The girl's gloomy aura didn't sit right with him, so in an attempt to distract her, Glenreed allowed Laetitia to pet his magnificent coat of fur.

"She sure cheered up fast, though..."

He couldn't believe he actually felt his heart skip a beat when he saw her smile, and when he heard her say the words *I love you*.

Whenever I see her in human form, she only gives me that stiff, formal smile...

But that carefree grin, like a flower blooming in the spring...that one did a number on his heart.

He couldn't have her acting so upset forever, so he preferred that smile to her gloomy frown, but still, he was curious about what caused this drastic change.

"I'll have to look into it..."

Glenreed already knew of the suspicious activity that Natalie seemed to be at the center of.

It was possible he'd be able to shake something else loose.

The more cards he had to play, the better.

Five more days and it would be his birthday.

Detecting that some sort of disturbance had occurred, Glenreed called a servant into his office.



THE five days before His Majesty's birthday party went by in a flash. There were many things I had to figure out and prepare for. It was a whirlwind of work, and before I knew it, the day had arrived.

When I stepped into the assembly hall, all the eyes in the room turned to look at me.

I rarely showed my face outside of the villa. To most people, this was their first opportunity to catch a glimpse of the new queen.

Curiosity. Caution. Valuation. Observation.

I didn't let their stares make me waver—I kept my gait steady and elegant as I walked.

My hair swayed with each step. The maids had painstakingly decorated it with a detailed array of white imitation roses and gems.

I was wearing a favorite dress of mine that I'd brought with me from Elltoria. The fabric was bright red, like a rose in bloom, with golden embroidery the same color as my hair. My puffy sleeves and the neckline that exposed my collarbones were both bordered by layers of frills and lace as white as snow.

Compared with the simple dresses and aprons I was used to wearing in the kitchen, all the accessories were actually making it hard to move around. But this extravagant dress was absolutely necessary to present myself as the queen, and it was catching the eye of everyone around me too.

I exchanged smiles with each person I passed. Eventually, I spotted Lady Natalie and her group.

"Good day. I'm glad to see you now that I'm wearing proper attire for a change."

Diaz sneered at me in response.

Of course, I wanted her to know I hadn't forgotten her rude comment from when she barged into my kitchen five days ago.

That act of bad manners was something I could even punish her for. However, it would be hard to follow through for something that insignificant, what with Diaz being a noblewoman.

Plus, there was the chance she would counterattack and claim I was trying to silence her after stealing her chiffon cake recipe. That would only leave me with a real mess on my hands.

If we were going to have a showdown, then it had to be today, when I'd made the necessary preparations in advance.

"Greetings, Your Majesty. I'd like to wish you a happy twenty-fourth birthday."

"Yes, thank you. It's a bit livelier here than at your villa, but I hope you're able to enjoy the party."

My seat was the queen's throne to his left.

After we exchanged much lighter conversation than one would expect between a husband and wife, I took my seat next to the king.

I stole a glance at him out of the corner of my eye. The man was showing no sign of emotion on his face.

His straight silver hair framed his beautiful face like strands of ice. King Glenreed's body was tall and visibly toned underneath that navy coat with gold embroidery, and he wore a black collared hood draped over his right shoulder. This regal outfit, fit for the ruler of Wolfvarte, was tied together by a white cravat around his neck, which bore a shiny blue-green gem—the same color as his eyes.

"We will now begin the birthday festivities in honor of His Majesty, King Glenreed."

One of the noblemen gave the announcement to the room, and one by one, guests began to take turns presenting their birthday gifts to the king.

Most of the gifts were famous handicrafts or gems from the guests' dominion within the kingdom. The line moved forward, and then it was time for Lady Natalie to present her imitation chiffon cake. The other nobles seemed a bit surprised by this.

"He doesn't often receive food as a present."

"She must be completely confident in the quality, don't you think?"

“I tried that cake the other day. It was a texture I’d never quite experienced before.”

“The flavor wasn’t so impressive, but that texture she came up with is something in itself.”

“I haven’t seen a cake in that shape before either. As a present, it’s certainly memorable.”

As I suspected, these nobles were unfamiliar with the shape and texture of the chiffon cake. Giran, while being introduced to the king as the inventor of the cake, shot me a triumphant look.

I silently fumed over his lack of remorse until it was my turn to present.

As both the queen and the last person in the room to go, I could feel all the excitement from the onlookers about my gift.

I stood up. Gilbert and Lucian, both holding trays, followed me as I moved forward.

I bowed before the king. Lucian removed his tray’s lid at my command, and I heard a wave of commotion travel through the room. But everyone quickly fell silent at the sight of the king’s glare.

“What’s the meaning of this? That looks exactly like the cake Natalie just presented me.”

“It’s not the same. This cake is a delicious treat and a worthy gift for you, my king.”

“Oh? So, you’re saying Natalie stole your cake recipe?”

“Yes, I am. Chef Giran identified himself as the creator of the chiffon cake, but that is nothing more than an ugly lie, and it has no place here among the festivities.”

“I see. Chef Giran, let’s hear your response to the queen’s accusations.”

“That’s a bald-faced lie! Queen Laetitia is the only dishonest one here!”

Giran leaped out from behind Lady Natalie.

“The chiffon cake was first created by us, and we have proof! Just a few days

ago, we treated many people to this cake at our party!”

“Right, I’ve heard of that. Laetitia, how do you explain yourself?”

“It may be true that they were first to reveal the cake to the world, but don’t you find that odd in itself? If they created the cake for your birthday, Your Majesty, then they shouldn’t be sharing it with so many people beforehand, lest they spoil the surprise of their brand-new creation.”

I heard a few whispers of agreement from the crowd of nobles.

“Chef Giran had only one reason for such an action—he wanted to claim credit for the stolen recipe by showing it off first.”

“That’s completely groundless! Have you no shame as a queen, trying to justify your plagiarism with false claims like this?!”

“Plagiarism? The only one guilty of that is you. This chiffon cake is something I’d been planning to make since before I even came to this kingdom, and I was the first one to complete it here in Wolfvarte.”

“You’re just uttering complete nonsense now!” Giran snickered at me. “Noblewomen in your kingdom don’t even cook. You’ll have to come up with better lies than that, I’m afraid!”

“You’re right, that’s the general culture of my kingdom, but I’ve taken to the kitchen as a hobby even before I came here. By all means, go and ask the chefs who used to work for me, and they’ll confirm everything I’ve just said.”

“That won’t be proof of anything! Of course your chefs are just going to lie to cover their employer’s story!!”

“Yes, that’s true. You might be right about that.” I let him have that one. “So, let me ask you. Do you have any proof that you created the chiffon cake before me? Aside from the tea party from five days ago, of course.”

“Lady Natalie, the other chefs, and I can all speak to the truth.”

“No, that won’t work. You’re the one who just said my own chefs have no credibility when it comes to this subject, so why would yours be any different?”

“I...!”

As Giran struggled to come up with an answer, Diaz took his place in front of the crowd.

“It’s not just our chefs. To create the cake’s unique shape, we had a special mold made by a blacksmith six months ago.”

“A blacksmith who works for your family, I assume? Once again, your employees could easily perjure themselves, so that won’t serve as proof.”

“...You don’t trust anyone, do you? It’s not as if you have any definitive proof of your own, Your Majesty. At the very least, we’re the ones who revealed the cake to the world five days ago.”

“If it’s proof you want, it’s proof you shall receive.” I smiled at Diaz and turned to look at the king. “Your Majesty, in order to prove myself, I’d like to perform a spell. May I have your permission?”

“...Very well. I’ll allow it.”

His blue-green eyes narrowed on me, looking interested.

Lucian handed me a cloth bag. It was a small pouch that could fit in the palm of my hand. Inside was...

“Iron scraps...?”

“What does she intend to do with those?”

The suspicious murmurs of the crowd of nobles served as background music while I prepared to use my magic.

Once again, I would be turning to transmutation—the spell that had proved most useful to me since regaining the memories of my past life.

“That shape...”

“Is that what she used to make the cake?”

I held up the doughnut-shaped chiffon cake mold to the murmuring crowd.

“This is proof that I came up with the chiffon cake recipe long ago.”

“...What could you possibly mean by that?” Diaz gave a mocking laugh. “Okay, I see you can use your little spells, but this isn’t the time for you to show off.”

“‘Little’ spell, is that right? What if I told you this transmuted cake mold will retain its shape for three entire days?!”

“Good heavens!!”

That cry came from a stout middle-aged man in the crowd.

“Pardon my interruption! Your Majesty, is that true?! Might I have a look at that mold for myself?!”

“Certainly. Be my guest.”

The man rushed up to me. I handed him the mold. He examined it closely, occasionally tapping at the metal surface and looking for any signs of wear.

“I can see this mold shows no signs of cracking, even when I tap it with my fingers... Does it really last for three days in this shape?”

“It does. It will last for three at least, but more likely four or five days in all.”

“How marvelous!”

With that declaration, he held the cake mold up to the sky like it was a gift from God. Everyone stopped and stared at this strange behavior.

Realizing how he was acting, the man cleared his throat and stood up straight.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty, for that shameful display. My name is Bodorey, and I work as the head sorcerer of the Wolfvartian royal court. I couldn’t help but be overcome by your marvelous act of magic, my queen.”

“...Marvelous? She only made that one little cake mold. It seems pretty ordinary to me,” Diaz remarked with suspicion in her voice.

Transmutation is seen as a minor form of magic, which is why Diaz didn’t seem to understand the value of what I’d made.

“Why, this is anything but ordinary!! Most transmuted objects only last a day at the very most. For this to last as long as three days is a tremendous achievement! Our queen’s impressive skill at such a young age can only be described as marvelous.”

“All right, thank you very much for the lesson. So was there some reason she had to show it off here?”

“There absolutely was. The strength and durability of transmuted items are physical expressions of the caster’s experience and imaginative mind. Her Majesty appears to be a skilled sorcerer, but even so, she could not create a cake mold like this at the drop of a hat. This could take years or more to master... Well, at the very least, it’s safe to say she learned to make this before she arrived in this kingdom.”

I mentally gave Bodorey my thanks, then took my turn to speak.

“Indeed, it’s just as Mr. Bodorey says. I began transmuting cake molds two years ago, and after dozens of failed attempts, I was able to make one that lasted a few days before it fell apart. That was about a year ago now.”

“Only a year?! Incredible!”

The glimmer in his eyes was a little too intense for me.

In truth, I’d actually succeeded in transmuting a cake mold that survived as long as a month, and after only a few days of practice too. The reason for my transmutation success was due to the years I’d lived two separate lives, which kind of felt like cheating. My presentation wasn’t entirely the truth, but since I really was the inventor of the chiffon cake in this world, I didn’t feel too guilty about it.

The mold I’d just made was purposefully weakened so as not to draw suspicion.

When I looked around the room, I could see that the nobles were now staring at me with more approval than before.

“She’s been practicing cake molds for two whole years?”

“That’s definitely before she came to our kingdom, then.”

“This makes Lady Natalie’s proof look rather weak...”

“With that strange shape, it’s hard to imagine they both came up with it on their own.”

Now that Diaz was feeling the accusing stares on her from all angles, her face twisted in fury.

“This is a farce! The queen’s head chef, Gilbert, got his job after we fired him

from our kitchen! And then, to retaliate, he sold off our recipe!!”

“Actually, it’s the opposite. You couldn’t stand that Gilbert and I had such a success after you forced him out of your kitchen, and that’s why you wanted to hurt us. I have the proof right here, in fact.”

With that signal, Gilbert removed the lid from the tray he was holding.

A light-brown chiffon cake sat atop the tray, visible to all.

“For this cake, we added a bit of black tea to the batter. If we’re the ones who stole and changed your recipe, then you should easily be able to make a chiffon cake with black tea to show us, right?”

“I...”

Giran gave a frustrated grunt.

Despite this fuss, he was still an experienced chef. He knew all too well that as simple as it looked, altering a recipe wasn’t likely to result in immediate success.

The truth was that this black tea chiffon cake was the result of my past life knowledge, as well as Gilbert’s incredible skill as a chef, unrivaled even by Giran—a man who wouldn’t be able to re-create it on his first try.

“I haven’t brought them with me, but I’m capable of making many other flavors of chiffon cake as well. If you say I stole the recipe, then you should be able to create the same variations yourself, right?”

“...! That’s not true!” shouted Diaz.

“She based this black tea version and all the rest on the recipe she stole from us! And now she’s trying to blame us for— Eek?!”

I had Father’s sinister smile on my face as I approached Diaz and whispered to her. “Perhaps it’s time you admit your guilt? If you think I still lack proof, I can go ahead and put the final nail in the coffin.”

“Quit your bluffing. If you have proof, then show me, right now!!”

“I really thought you’d learn when to back down, but I guess not. Right now, in my closet drawer at home, you’ll find all the proof you need. Shall I have it brought here at once?”

“I don’t believe you!! I’m sure it’s just fake pr—”

“Diaz, be silent.”

Diaz’s shouts of desperation were interrupted by a quiet voice.

The room fell to a hush all at once.

It was none other than Lady Natalie, the girl who had gone largely forgotten so far, who had spoken.

“Stop making a fool of yourself in front of His Majesty. We’re the ones at fault here.”

“L-Lady Natalie? What are you talking about?”

Diaz had no idea how to respond to Lady Natalie, who was now talking.

Even I was a bit shocked.

Throughout this whole fight, Lady Natalie had stayed as silent as a doll.

“I didn’t order the plagiarism of the chiffon cake... But Diaz and Giran are both my responsibility, and I’d like to accept punishment on their behalf.” Lady Natalie’s voice wavered, but she managed to say the words.

“Lady Natalie?! What are you saying?! The queen is entirely to blame for this! We haven’t done anything wrong!”

“Are you telling me the truth?” asked King Glenreed, who had been observing this new development.

Diaz turned to offer a desperate explanation to the man who controlled both the room and the kingdom itself.

“Of course! We made the chiffon cake first!”

“I see.”

The king nodded, but...

“You must think I’m a real fool, trying to feed me such a ridiculous story.”

“What?! Whatever do you mean, Your Majesty?! I think nothing of the sort!”

“You’ve given me nothing but lies. See for yourself.”

His aide handed Diaz a single sheet of paper, then made his way around the room, distributing more of the papers to me and the other nobles.

Each sheet bore the king's signature.

It contained a statement—testimony from Diaz's blacksmith. *"Miss Diaz instructed me to claim I made the cake mold six months ago."*

Diaz was now trembling in fear. She knew this was the truth.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself, Diaz?"

"I..."

"Surprised your blacksmith betrayed you? It's simple. You used your family power to threaten him into perjuring himself, but when a greater power came along, he changed his tune. I ordered the investigation that resulted in this testimony because I knew you were up to something suspicious."

Diaz collapsed at this declaration from the king.

Rather than "arrogant," His Majesty actually appeared to be a clever man. He was prepared to question Diaz about the plagiarism well in advance, having the papers written up and everything.

Then he chose this opportunity to reveal her crimes to an audience.

This was so he could take the wind out of the sails of the conspirators from the western region, as well as display his power and investigative skills to everyone else in the room.

If I had decided to roll over and let them get away with the plagiarism, His Majesty might have had his own plans in place to expose their crimes.

King Glenreed was still young at the age of twenty-four, and the lack of control he exercised over the Wolfvartian nobles was seen as a weakness by some, but maybe he was actually extremely capable when it came to governing after all.

"Compared with Lady Natalie, who tried to take the blame for her own subordinates, you, Diaz, completely disgust me. You and Giran have brought shame to your chefs, and there will be no escaping the punishment that awaits you."



“YOUR Majesty!!”

After the events of the birthday party settled down and I brought other matters to a close, I returned home to the villa and found Gilbert rushing out to meet me.

“I heard you proved that we were the ones who made the chiffon cake first!”

“Yes, everything managed to work out, thanks to the black tea chiffon cake we made together. Thank you, Gilbert.”

“No, my queen! I should be thanking you!” He shook his head from side to side. “Giran’s plot fell apart thanks to all the effort you put into revealing the truth!”

“Thank you, Gilbert. I’m so glad I get to return your letter of resignation.”

Lucian handed me the letter and I passed it back to Gilbert.

Gilbert first gave me this letter when the chiffon cake plagiarism came to light.

He knew he was an enemy in the eyes of Giran and Diaz, so if we were unable to prove our ownership of the recipe, he wanted to resign as my head chef and claim responsibility for the whole incident.

At first, I tried to refuse his resignation, but Gilbert didn’t back down.

He always seemed like the timidest of men, and he wasn’t exactly brave of heart deep down, but there was also a stubborn side of him that knew what he wanted. Even that first time we made the chiffon cake here in the villa, he’d tried to resign on me too.

“Hehe! It was quite surprising to receive two separate letters of resignation over such a short period of time...”

“...You have my sincerest apologies!”

“No, it’s all right. I don’t know what I’d do if you quit, so as long as you stay here in the villa, it’s not a problem.”

Gilbert would continue to work under my roof.

That was one of the reasons why I worked so hard over the last few days.

He knew so much about food and always prepared me wonderful meals, and not to mention, he helped me re-create a number of Earth recipes already. Gilbert was a valuable person to have with me.

Though he lacked courage and had a tendency to be too negative about himself, I knew he took great pride in his work as a chef.

“There’s still lots of meals I’d like you to help me cook. You’ll stay here and make even more delicious food with me, won’t you?”

“Of course! Getting to cook with you is an honor unbefitting of someone like me!”

Gilbert had turned red. Since he was usually so pale, it was a bit of a rare sight.

With that, the two of us began to discuss our next endeavors in the kitchen.



AFTER parting ways with Laetitia, Gilbert sat in his room inside the villa, staring down at the letter of resignation.

“Tomorrow, I’ll get to work here again...”

His heart warmed in a combination of relief and happiness.

Gilbert knew he was a man who struggled to get on in the world. He was aware that he was a timid, undependable person too.

After being driven out of Natalie’s villa by Giran, he ended up working for Laetitia, only to bring more trouble to her doorstep.

“And yet, the queen didn’t want to get rid of me...”

He felt his heart start to speed up when he thought of her.

Laetitia was beautiful, wise, and cooked all kinds of delicious meals.

Still, she always smiled kindly at him. He still remembered how fast his heart raced when she first asked if they could cook together.

Queen Laetitia...

Her title carried weight, and he knew if she were anyone else, Gilbert would never be able to speak so casually to the queen.

It was nothing more than a coincidence that she chose him to be her cooking partner. And yet...

“Thank you...”

Gilbert was determined to live up to Laetitia’s every expectation.



ON the same night that Gilbert was reflecting on his dedication to Laetitia...

Glenreed had finished reviewing all of his birthday presents and decided to take a short break.

I’m kind of hungry...

The king usually wasn’t so aware of the state of his stomach.

Glenreed had little interest in food. He never minded missing a meal or two, and no one particular food or meal ever sounded better to him than another.

But now, it was a sweet aroma that was coaxing an appetite out of Glenreed.

“A chiffon cake, huh...?”

He turned his gaze to the silver platter that sat atop his desk. It was Laetitia’s birthday present to him.

Glenreed’s sharp nose could pick up the sweet smell of cake, even from underneath the metal lid.

Its shape is unusual, but it smells normal for a baked good.

For some reason, the sweetness overcame him, and shockingly, the king felt an appetite start to form. He cocked his head, confused by this strange reaction from his body.

Very well. I’ll just give it a try.

The cake was a birthday present, after all. There was no reason why he couldn’t have a bite or two.

Glenreed removed the lid and found that the cake was already cut into slices.

He reached out and grabbed one for himself.

“.....”

He chewed in silence.

“...This is good.”

The comment slipped out of his mouth, surprising even himself.

Glenreed couldn't remember the last time he truly enjoyed anything he ate, but that reaction must have been involuntary.

The king usually had no interest in food. He didn't even have the words to describe what it was he liked about the chiffon cake.

I'll take one more slice.

Reaching out and taking one off the tray, Glenreed parted his lips to receive another slice of cake.



AT His Majesty's birthday celebration, Giran and the others fell under suspicion of plagiarizing our chiffon cake recipe.

Though no humans were harmed, the location of the reveal was a big problem.

Gifting the king a plagiarized cake was the ultimate sign of disrespect. That's why Diaz broke down so dramatically that day.

The head of Diaz's household, Lady Natalie, was also shaken up, but even as she turned pale, she never backed down until the end.

I'd always seen Lady Natalie as something like a doll without a will of her own, so her intense transformation surprised me. I wondered if she couldn't stand the sight of her subordinates continuing to rattle off false evidence, so she felt compelled to speak up.

It appeared I wasn't the only one who felt that way. The young girl gained a lot of sympathy by trying to take the blame for her subordinates' actions.

She wouldn't be acquitted, I was quite sure, but if she were to lose her spot as a candidate for queen, relationships were sure to fall apart and cause chaos

among the ranks.

Now, two days after the birthday party, there was still discussion about what their punishment was to be.

“Krona, I’ve been invited to a party of nobles outside the castle walls this evening, so I’ll be back somewhat late. Can you check to be sure Strawberry, the cat, doesn’t get locked in my room tonight?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Have a good time at the party!”

Krona sent me off as I boarded my carriage and left the royal villa.

A nobleman’s mansion outside the castle walls...

...was not where I was heading.

“You were right, my queen. There they are,” Lucian whispered to me.

We exited the carriage and turned back, hidden from view. We stood behind the trees that bordered the villa.

The two of us watched as a hooded figure emerged from the house.

Here at my villa, I had guards who were permanently stationed to protect me, and soldiers from the castle also regularly patrolled the area.

The person wasn’t being stopped by the guards, nor was there any patrol out at that moment, meaning it had to be someone who worked on the inside.

But at this hour, there was no reason for anyone at the villa to be going out.

“This is it. Let’s follow them.”

Lucian and I quietly pursued the shadowy figure.

My trusty servant was the only one I could take with me, since I had no proof of the true traitor in our midst.

The cloaked figure continued through the silent forest.

Though we were technically within the castle walls, the land was just that vast. There didn’t appear to be any guards on patrol in these isolated sections where there stood no buildings.

Anxiously, we followed our subject until we reached a bit of a clearing.

This was their meeting place. The cloaked figure started to speak with a few men, when I spotted the feathery body of a gigantic creature glowing under the starlight.

“A griffin... That means...”

This was a type of Mythical Beast.

Griffins were incredibly rare. I’d heard it was Lady Natalie’s associates who brought it here to the castle.

If the stolen chiffon cake didn’t work out, they were planning to gift the king with a griffin on the day of his party.

Griffins are creatures of legend, with birdlike talons and beaks, majestic wings, and the strong haunches and torsos of lions.

This one appeared to be kept in an unpopulated area, to be sure it wouldn’t attack any passing humans or beastfolk.

“I’d heard that griffins were proud, peaceful animals...”

But this one was snapping its beak and kicking at the ground as it paced around.

It seemed to be upset, probably because it was tied to a metal post by a thick rope. It scanned its birdlike eyes around the area, until...

“Gyo-iiiiii!!”

Oops.

Its sharp senses appeared to have picked up our presence.

When the griffin started to screech, the men all turned to look at us.

“Y-Your Majesty?!”

I knew that voice.

It was Krona, my maid.

The beastfolk girl had keen senses of her own. She could see us even in the dark of night.

“Why have you come here, Your Majesty...?”

“Because I was suspicious of you.”

With no reason left to hide, I emerged from the bushes where I was standing.

The men looked shocked to see me, and they quickly stood at alert.

“But...why? I haven’t done anything to be suspicious of...”

“That’s true. You’ve been a fantastic maid, and as far as your schemes went, you carried them out perfectly.”

“Then, how did you...?”

“Because of your personality, and how you never acted like a maid in the first place.”

“What? It was something that simple...?” Krona’s mouth fell open a little.

That reaction, in such a serious setting as this, seemed like the perfect example.

Honestly, I always liked how Krona marched to the beat of her own drum.

The doubts started when I thought about why a girl like her would choose a job where she was forced to wait on other people. I even wondered if someone had forced her to sneak in as a maid and give them an inside man under my roof.

It was just a crazy idea of mine, but that wasn’t the only reason I questioned her.

First, the chiffon cake that Giran came up with—it was more like a rip-off than an imitation of ours.

But all the chefs at my villa were well versed in the chiffon cake recipe. Even if one of them had betrayed me and sold off the recipe, we wouldn’t have seen such a drop in quality.

Of course, there were small differences when it came to things like the skills of the chefs involved, as well as the actual utensils used.

But even if Giran wasn’t quite at Gilbert’s level, he was still a very talented chef.

The shape of the chiffon cake mold, the most unique cooking utensil in this

world, had been masterfully re-created by their blacksmith.

Even if they didn't steal a whisk from our villa or try to re-create one, I knew the whisk wasn't absolutely necessary in the first place.

When Gilbert and I tried making a few cakes by using a wooden spatula or fork instead of a whisk, the finished results weren't as good, but they were still acceptable as chiffon cakes, so we knew it was possible to substitute the whisk entirely.

That's why I found it strange that Giran's cake lacked so much of the flavor that ours had.

But it would all make sense if the traitor wasn't one of the chefs.

Aside from the chefs, few people in the house would be able to keep a close eye on our cooking process.

There was also the possibility our kitchen was being spied on, or that the information only came from one of the chefs secondhand, but that wouldn't have yielded anything close to the complete recipe for the thief.

Other than the chefs, there were very few servants who could know how to make the chiffon cake.

There was Borgan or the head maid, who were in charge of all the work throughout the house overall. The only person left was Krona, who had been in the kitchen on the day I first made the cake.

She'd been in the kitchen with me while I prepared the ingredients and utensils, but she had to leave the room when I actually worked on the recipe. She could probably only guess the proper steps in making the cake.

Assuming that she was the traitor, it made sense why the fake chiffon cake didn't turn out very well.

Now I was getting into conjecture, but I wondered if Krona didn't properly understand how I used the oil in my recipe.

When I first tasted the fake chiffon cake, it reminded me of my failed attempt at making one in my past life, when I forgot to add any oil to the batter.

I was pretty sure it was uncommon to add vegetable oil, instead of something

like butter, to a dessert recipe in this world.

She probably mistakenly thought the oil was supposed to be used on the cake mold itself or something like that, and she gave Giran the wrong information as a result.

Well, the details didn't matter.

There were still many things I wanted to hear from Krona.

"Krona, I had your past investigated and learned that you're from a famous commoner family. But your parents passed away three years ago, isn't that right? And unfortunately, they were traders who lost their goods in the same accident that took their lives, leaving you behind with their debts. You have a little sister as well, so it's not unnatural for you to have taken the high-paying job of royal villa maid... I'm just a bit curious about who you're in debt to."

"...My parents borrowed money from someone who worked for Miss Diaz's family."

"...I thought so."

If they were related to Diaz, they probably looked down on beastfolk.

They beckoned Krona, a beastfolk girl, into their merciless debt repayment scheme, maybe even demanding she be their pawn if she couldn't pay back the money.

But certainly, she took the job as a maid for its use in undercover work.

"Please allow me to ask...how did you find out I was the traitor?"

She trembled as she spoke.

"Who knows? Maybe it was my women's intuition."

I had my reasons, of course, but I wasn't about to give them away so easily.

Another hint came from the day of the birthday party, when Giran revealed he wasn't familiar with the black tea chiffon cake.

We only made that version after Giran first stopped by to visit the villa. Keeping the kitchen locked down while we cooked, we were careful not to let any information escape the premises. Simultaneously, this became free time for

the chefs to do as they pleased in the kitchen.

I kept them under strict orders not to reveal the black tea cake to anyone, but if any of them were the traitor, they still would have gone straight to Giran with that information.

On the day of the party, Giran looked shocked by what appeared to be his first time seeing the black tea chiffon cake.

At that point, I could safely assume none of my chefs were the traitor under our roof.

The black tea chiffon cake really proved useful in more ways than one.

After narrowing down the suspects, I decided it was time to lay a trap.

On the day of the birthday party, I lied when I told Diaz that the ultimate proof of her plagiarism was in my bedroom.

Earlier today, I'd left a fake, official-looking envelope, sealed with wax and everything, in the back of the drawer in my writing desk. Then, I'd asked Krona to check on it for me.

If she was guilty, I expected her to use the opportunity to steal this valuable "proof."

Just as I expected, Krona took the bait.

She was here to deliver her co-conspirators the important documents. In fact, looking around, I realized I recognized these men.

I'd seen them in Lady Natalie's villa, standing at attention by Diaz's side.

Diaz was under house arrest for the plagiarism incident, but she was probably still able to send out her subordinates to destroy evidence for her, at the very least.

She probably knew that any extra evidence from me could lead to a more severe punishment in her case, so she used Krona as an intermediary to get the evidence away from me.

I'd kept my eye on Krona, who just seemed dazed by the shock of having her betrayal revealed, when suddenly...

“Krona, look out!!”

“?!”

One of the men had thrown something on her.

The glass bottle and the liquid inside sparkled in the starlight.

Krona was now soaked in something that reeked of fish.

“What...?!”

“Go, griffin! The beast maid should make a nice meal!”

Another man loosened the rope that was attached to the griffin’s neck.

The rope remained fastened, but with some slack in it now, the griffin could move around in a wider radius. The creature took flight and headed straight for the drenched Krona.

“This way, Krona!!”

I screamed for the girl to follow me, and the two of us dashed into the forest.

Blocked by the dense row of trees, the griffin came to a quick halt and turned back the way it had come.

But it didn’t appear to have given up. The griffin soared into the air and looked down from above the trees, searching for a glimpse of us. If we strayed too far from the cover of the trees, the griffin would surely swoop down on us.

“Haha! This is perfect! Let’s get that fake queen out of our way while we’re at it!”

The men gave enthusiastic cheers. They were illuminated by the starlight, loudly making their voices heard, and yet, the griffin didn’t try to attack them.

“It’s your scent...!”

The smell coming off Krona was probably meat juice or blood of some kind. And the griffin must have looked unhappy because it was hungry. If someone appeared before it like that, smelling of delicious meat, there was no way it wouldn’t attack.

“Were they planning to kill me as soon as I gave them the evidence...?” Krona

paled as she murmured this realization to herself.

As beastfolk, Krona's body was more powerful than a human's.

If she wasn't totally spaced out like before, Krona should have no problem keeping up with those humans if it came to a fight.

Now that Diaz was under house arrest, if she sent any of her soldiers out, it would look like she was plotting an insurrection. She couldn't use soldiers, but she still wanted to kill Krona, an accomplice in the plagiarism, to shut her up for good.

That's why Krona was told to meet all the way out here, where the griffin was kept.

"Get away from me, Your Majesty! The griffin will get you too if you don't run!"

At my command, Lucian stopped Krona from jumping in front of us as a decoy.

"Your Majesty?! What are you doing?!"

"Just wait. I think I can stop this griffin with magic."

"Don't lie to me! You can't hit an animal in the air with m—"

"Yes I can."

Actually, it made for a more convenient target.

I didn't have to worry about my aim as much, since there was no risk if I missed my shot. I focused on my body, weaving the magical energy through my veins, chanted my spell, and...

"Gyowah?!"

A lightning bolt shot from the ground and struck the griffin with a bright burst.

Unfortunately, my older brothers had done a very good job of teaching me precise spells.

The first time I tried to use that water blade spell on Sumia, I let my guard down and nearly hit her, but this time, my aim was just as I intended.

The griffin came crashing down to the ground, but it had only fainted and didn't appear to be injured. That was part of my plan too.

The griffin's only crime was being forced into a hungry state, so I definitely didn't want to kill the poor thing. Though, for that reason, it took some time to calculate the correct amount of force, and I felt bad that the delay seemed to have scared Kroma.

With their griffin now powerless, the men tried to flee.

"You're not getting away."

With a quick spell, I trapped the men inside a cage of ice.

Just to be safe, I surrounded the sleeping griffin with the same ice too.

Unlike my transmuted items, these walls would only last for a short amount of time, but it worked as an emergency blockade.

"I sure do like it in the forest. You can use your spells without worrying about getting into trouble. Don't you think it's nice?"

"...Your Majesty, you're probably the only queen in the whole world who would see it that way..."

She seemed a bit weirded out at first, but then, Kroma knelt down at my feet.

"Your Majesty, I give you my sincerest apologies for taking part in the plagiarism scheme. I'm prepared to accept your punishment...however..."

"Is it your sister?"

She nodded.

"I know very well that I betrayed you, and I have no right to ask for anything. But...still, please don't let my sister be hurt by my crimes..."

"I can't give you my word... But I'll keep an eye out for your younger sister."

"Thank you for your kindness..."

Clear teardrops ran down Kroma's face and into the dirt.

Now that she was free from the pressure of her betrayal and the terror of the griffin, her eyes seemed to be letting go of all the tears she'd held back.

I understood that Krona had no choice but to do what she did.

When I saw her put herself between me and the griffin, I knew her feelings for me were the real thing. I didn't want to believe that all the happiness I'd seen from her, like the first time she bit into that chiffon cake, had been a lie.

But still, she was guilty of betraying me, her master, and was involved in the plagiarized birthday present for the king. I couldn't allow her to be declared innocent. It wasn't proper for a queen, nor would it make any sense.

I would put in a request for her punishment to be reduced...but she would probably still end up serving time in jail.

Krona's sister would lose her parents to the accident and her sister to her crimes, and she'd be left alone with nothing but the remaining debt.

With nowhere else to turn, the girl's future was all but decided already. The sister was a victim, and she hadn't done anything wrong.

With the image in my mind of Krona throwing herself in front of the griffin, I decided I would do what I could to give her younger sister a bright future to look forward to.

Chapter 7: A New Fluffy Friend Arrives at the Villa

THREE days passed after I discovered Krona's betrayal.

News arrived that she'd received a sentence of nearly two years in prison for her actions.

It was a light punishment in comparison to her crime—that much was certain.

Krona's sentence was reduced due to the helpful information she provided during her confession and because I chose not to push for a harsher punishment as her victim.

In addition to a list of people involved in the plagiarism plot and how it was carried out, she revealed the wicked details about how her family was forced into the debt repayment scam.

King Glenreed had already been suspicious of this shady method of debt collection, but he never managed to find definitive proof of wrongdoing until now. But thanks to Krona's testimony, he was able to establish a connection between the debt repayments and Diaz's family fortune.

From what I'd heard, King Glenreed planned to use this opportunity to investigate their crimes and expose any corruption he came across.

"And Diaz is getting sixty years in prison..." I muttered under my breath as I stroked Lord Aroo with the slicker brush.

Before Krona's testimony, she was supposed to get only ten years, but then her attempted killing of me, the queen of Wolfvarte, was revealed as well. As more and more charges piled onto her, the severity of her punishment worsened.

This world's average life span is much shorter than that in modern-day Japan.

Even among the upper classes, few live to see their eighties.

For Diaz, who was already thirty-seven, sixty years in prison was no different from a life sentence.

Giran, the head chef, was also sentenced to prison, but for thirty years. By presenting the stolen chiffon cake as a present for His Majesty, the crime became defamation. His reputation as a famous chef was ancient history now.

As a commoner guilty of plagiarism, no one could testify on his behalf to have his sentence reduced.

“All that’s left now is Lady Natalie’s sentence. How do you think His Majesty will rule?” I asked Lord Aroo.

He turned his head away in response, as if saying, *“I wish you wouldn’t ask me that right now...”*

“I know you can’t answer that question. But when I see your silver fur and those blue-green eyes, they remind me so much of King Glenreed, and I just can’t help but think of him.”

I looked over Lord Aroo’s body, confirming that I’d given him a proper brushing.

Not to brag, but it was a job well done indeed.

The tips of his smooth silver fur sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. I wanted nothing more than to bury my hands in that coat, but he resisted my attempts to pet him, probably because of last time, when I got too carried away.

It was no one’s fault but my own, though that didn’t make it any less disappointing.

“Still...I hope I didn’t upset His Majesty.”

Lord Aroo’s ears perked up at that.

“I wanted to expose their plagiarism at all costs, but the only opportunity for such a reveal was during King Glenreed’s birthday celebration... I feel bad that I caused a terrible fuss on his special day.”

“Roo!”

“I’m sure that’s not his concern. Don’t let it get to you.”

Somehow, Lord Aroo’s cry sounded like it was supposed to console me. The wolf was worried about *me*.

“Why, thank you. I hope His Majesty shares your views... But I haven’t received a real response to the chiffon cake I sent him either. I fear he could be mad at me for making trouble during his party, but either way, I know he’s a very busy man, so I suppose I shouldn’t get ahead of myself.”

When I referred to the king as a “very busy man,” I noticed Lord Aroo stiffen for a moment.

...Did I imagine that?

“Oh, though naturally, I did receive a thank-you letter for the cake! But it only contained a very formal response...and I was hoping I could hear his impressions straight from His Majesty’s own mouth. Maybe he’ll have some improvements to suggest. Even though I made quite a scene at the party, it was still meant as a birthday present, after all.”

I didn’t have a very good read on King Glenreed’s personality yet, nor did I know how many more interactions we would share in the future.

But in my own right, I was grateful to the king for giving me this life in the villa. Expressing that gratitude was a big reason I decided on making the chiffon cake for his birthday.

...Well, okay, it was a little more than that too.

Choosing the chiffon cake was a bit of a calculation on my part—I wanted to present His Majesty with a food this world hadn’t seen before. But the plagiarism incident was never part of the plan...

Now that the dust had settled, I still hoped to hear King Glenreed’s opinion of the cake.

Since there was always the threat of a birthday gift like that containing poison, I knew His Majesty wouldn’t try the cake the day of the party. That night, or perhaps the next day, after the cake had been tested for poison, was probably when he ate his first slice.

“I haven’t heard anything about His Majesty disliking sweets, so I certainly hope he enjoyed the ca— Whoa!”

Lord Aroo was pushing his head into my palm.

If he touched me first, that means I can pet him, right?

Little by little, I slid my hand across the wolf's coat, only to find that he was holding perfectly still in place.

His fluffy fur felt so nice on my skin.

"Lord Aroo...?"

As grateful as I was, I couldn't understand where this sudden change of heart had come from.

"This is my way of thanking you, so just accept it already," said Lord Aroo's stare as he eyed me from the side.

I didn't understand this timing, but since the opportunity was before me, I decided to get my fill.

Carefully, I set both hands on his coat. I wasn't going to get carried away like last time. As I busied myself with the fine art of wolf petting, Lord Aroo suddenly rose and perked up his ears.

I followed his gaze until I heard the rattling sound of an approaching carriage.

It was one of Lady Natalie's servants, driving a four-horse carriage. The usual passenger car appeared to have been replaced by a large wooden box.

"Your Majesty, I beg your pardon. I've come here today because there's something I need to confirm. May I have a moment of your time?"

"What's this about?"

"Could you please take a look inside this box?"

I walked behind the carriage. There was a window in the box that I could look through. When I peered inside, I recognized the sharp, birdlike eyes staring back at me.

"The griffin...?"

"Yes. He's been fully fed, so would it be okay for me to take him out?"

"...Yes, that's all right."

The servant opened the crate, and the griffin hopped right out, casually giving

its enormous wings a stretch.

White fur covered the beast's head and wings. In contrast to their birdlike shape, the griffin's muscled torso and haunches resembled those of a lion. He was a stunning, regal specimen of a Mythical Beast, save for the two tufts of feathers at the top of his head that looked like a cute pair of cat ears.

The griffin seemed a bit startled to see Lord Aroo, but he quickly turned back to look at me.

I stared into his golden eyes, and then, the griffin lowered his head. He dropped down even further, until his head reached the ground where his talons rested.

"He's showing submission...?"

"I thought so. It appears he's chosen you as his master, Your Majesty."

The servant nodded, accepting the sight before him.

Griffins, a kind of Mythical Beast, were the proudest of creatures.

But on the rarest of occasions, a griffin might decide to serve a human they deem worthy of their ownership, or so I'd heard.

...This is all because of the lightning spell I cast three days ago, isn't it?

Fortunately, my spell had succeeded in subduing the griffin without causing anything more than some bruising. But now the beast appeared to acknowledge me as its superior and went as far as to see me as its new master.

"If you'll have him, Your Majesty, I'd like to leave this griffin in your care..."

"Aren't griffins a very rare breed of Mythical Beast?"

"Yes, that's right. Once a griffin has chosen its owner, it won't settle down again until it's kept by that person, so we've been at a loss with how to deal with it."

"I see..."

The servants did indeed look troubled, but it was the griffin's eyes, filled with anticipation, that caught my attention.

I don't want to let him down...

“I know how much trouble we made for you, and we’ve been in need of a home for this griffin, so please allow us to pay for the next ten years of this creature’s expenses, be it for food or anything else.”

“Very well. I’ll take good care of him.”

I didn’t have to think about my answer.

With a pet as large as a griffin, the cost of feeding and keeping it was astronomical. But with that problem out of the way, and with the griffin having chosen me as its owner on top of that, there was no reason for me to refuse.

I had wolves and a Gardener Cat, and now this griffin would be my newest furry friend here at the villa. Lady Natalie’s servant also seemed relieved that the griffin had taken to me.

“Your Majesty, thank you so much for accepting this creature. Now we’ve finally been able to grant Lady Natalie’s wish.”

“Oh my. Does that mean it was Lady Natalie’s idea to have me take in the griffin?”

“Yes. She must have sought a loving home for the griffin, and that’s why she gave us those direct orders.”

So this was Lady Natalie’s doing?

Until now, I’d gotten the impression she was something like a puppet for Diaz’s doings, but now that the puppet master was gone, perhaps she was starting to move by her own will.

I didn’t know what she was thinking or what she intended to do from here on out, but I would probably need to find out at some point.

Lady Natalie’s servant went home after that with a look of relief on his face.

The griffin remained with me, still in its chains, along with another one of Lady Natalie’s servants who had been in charge of caring for the beast.

Immediately, I was eager to ask this caretaker all sorts of questions about griffins.

“Do you see how this griffin has two extra tufts of feathers on its head? This

feature is unique to males. Females don't have any feather tufts, or if they do, they're very small."

I looked at the griffin.

The fuzzy plumage atop its head swayed in the wind.

Much like other birds, the male griffins alone possessed flashier feathers than their female counterparts. Though I wasn't actually sure if griffins fell under the category of "bird" or "mammal." Their heads completely resembled a bird of prey, and I'd heard they even laid eggs, so perhaps that meant they took after birds more than anything else.

A Mythical Beast had no reason to fall under Earth biology norms, but I just couldn't let it go for some reason.

With my questions still in mind, I reached my hand out toward the griffin.

I stroked the base of his neck slowly, so as not to startle him, enjoying the tickle of his white feathers against my palm. Though the beast looked so tough on the outside, his body was soft and gentle to the touch.

Compared with the fuzzy fur of the wolves, the griffin's feathers felt light and airy. His feathers rustled in the wind. They were slightly warm to the touch thanks to the rays of sunlight from above.

The griffin bent his neck down enough for me to pet his head with both hands.

"Why, thank you. You're a nice boy, aren't you? What's this griffin's name?"

"Please choose a name of your own liking, Your Majesty. Griffins take joy in receiving a name from their owner."

If they were pleased by being given names, that meant they understood the notion of "names" in the first place. This griffin was worked up into a frenzy on the night we first met, but it appeared they were actually very intelligent creatures on the inside.

"A name...for a male griffin..."

"Griffy" felt like one of the cute names Lord Aroo had rejected for himself, so I wanted to avoid that situation again.

“Griffin. Griffin... Fon. How about ‘Fon’?”

“Kyaaah!!”

The Griffin—Fon—let out a cheerful screech.

My awe at its gallant cry was interrupted by a loud...

“Arooooooooo!!”

Lord Aroo let out a howl of his own. He was staring up at me from my side.

“Don’t you dare forget about me,” his pouty stare seemed to imply.

I reached down with one hand to pet the jealous wolf.

With my right hand, I stroked Lord Aroo, and with my left, Fon. Their fur was mine to pet to my heart’s content.

From the villa window, I could see Berry staring down at us and breaking into a big, sleepy yawn.



Side Story 1

Prequel: It Seemed Like Such a Waste

“HOW could I not have taken the top rank...?”

Behind his glasses, Ilius’s eyes were wide as he muttered to himself.

Ilius was fifteen years old this year, making him the proper age to enter the Royal Elltoria Academy.

He clutched the results of the school’s placement exam in his hands.

As a boy who was held in high esteem for his exceptional academic skills, Ilius assumed the rank of top student would be his for the taking.

“The Gramwell girl ranked one point above me...”

He read the name of the student listed above him, the one who’d managed to secure the highest score on the exam and claim the title of top of their class.

Laetitia Gramwell.

She was engaged to Fritz, the crown prince, and was rumored to be a girl of many talents.

Entering the Royal Elltoria Academy was an important measure of status for all young nobles of the kingdom. If one managed to be accepted to the school and kept their grades up, it would later impact how they were treated as an adult member of high society.

...Very well. I’m sure I can take back the title as soon as school begins.

Ilius wasn’t a sore loser.

As of late, his time had been occupied by Sumia—covering up her birth name and circumstances, while also taking care of the girl who was now to live as a baron’s daughter. The pair would be enrolling in the academy together this year, and Ilius was busy tutoring her, being sure she wouldn’t fall behind in her

classes.

But I can give it all a rest when school starts. Once I have more free time, I'll claim the title of top student for myself.

Ilius was determined to put all his effort into his studies...



HOWEVER...

“Damn that foolish prince!!”

He'd saved his most incriminating insults for a time he was alone in the library.

With a quill in one hand, Ilius was hard at work on an essay for his literature class. It wasn't a particularly difficult topic, but the problem was that this was *Fritz's* homework in the first place.

He says he's too busy, so that means I have to do everything for him...?

This was far from the first time it had happened either.

He wanted to say no, but as the third son of a duke, there was no rejecting a demand from the crown prince.

Six months had passed since the school year began, and Fritz was only getting worse about forcing work on him.

Just what does Prince Fritz think homework is for? Does studying even mean anything to him?

As irritating as it was, Ilius had orders from his father to cozy up to the prince.

Ilius had succeeded in getting closer to Fritz under the guise of being his friend, but on the inside, the whole thing just made him feel humiliated.

His Highness never has to study, and I lose all the time I could spend working on other affairs...

He thought back to their second round of exams.

Ilius managed to score the top grade on the first test of the school year, but when it came time for the next round of exams, the title returned to Laetitia.

Once again, his loss was by a slim margin. It only made the prince's habit of shirking his responsibilities all the more upsetting.

Plagued by frustration, Ilius rose from his seat and went in search of a specific book to use in the prince's essay. He only needed it for one quotation, but he wanted to confirm he had it memorized correctly.

With a rough idea of where it was, Ilius began to scan the spines of each book until he spotted it on the shelf. However...

"Not you again..."

He was reaching out for the book when his fingers collided with those of Laetitia. Her long blonde hair swung lightly around her body. For whatever reason, the two of them always seemed to be after the exact same books.

"Move your hand. I found it first."

"No, I was reaching for it before you were."

Neither party was about to give in.

We had to find a compromise that first time we were both after the same book...

That was three months ago now.

Strangely, the more often they were forced to share books, the more annoyed they became with each other, and the facade of friendliness between them started to crumble.

Neither of them felt like they had to hold back anymore. They always let each other have it.

"I'm going first today. I won't need it for long, and I'll let you have it after that, so wait for me to finish."

"...Why do you get the right to make that decision?"

"Because I'm extremely busy."

"That's not a real answer."

Despite her complaints, Laetitia sat down in the seat across from Ilius, where he was working on the essay. She opened up another book, and Ilius took that

as a sign that she agreed to wait for him.

Silence returned to the library. The only remaining sound came from the turning of their pages.

...She's an interesting girl.

Ilius had shifted his gaze from the pages of his book to Laetitia herself.

She was reading a particular book on sorcery that was famous for its difficulty to comprehend. The look on her face was enthusiastic, though also perplexed at times. At one point, her brow became particularly furrowed.

Did she run into a tough passage?

Laetitia's intense scowl suddenly changed to one of relief, which lit up her whole face.

It appeared she'd managed to interpret the text she was reading.

Ilius watched her smile grow. She looked so truly happy.

"...Why can't you do it like that all the time?" he murmured to himself.

"What was that, Ilius?"

"...I didn't say anything."

Ilius returned his gaze to the book.

Laetitia Gramwell was being avoided by almost every other student at the academy. On top of being a duke's only daughter, she was the kingdom's future crown princess.

Laetitia was also a model student, with grades that earned her high rankings in class, and on top of it all, she never failed to conduct herself in a perfectly respectable manner.

But more than any of that, the reason no one ever tried to approach her was undoubtedly because of her overwhelmingly sinister natural smile. She had only a few friends in this school—everyone else was completely terrified of Laetitia, avoiding her at all costs.

Those people must be blind... Wait, what am I thinking?

Ilius pushed up his glasses, as if to brush off the thought that had just snuck its way into his mind.

Laetitia was his academic rival. Their only interactions were the very occasional conversation. Ilius didn't want anything more or less from her, and yet, for some reason, he found his heart unsettled.

"Hey, Laetitia."

"What?"

"....."

Ilius couldn't find the words to respond.

He'd opened his mouth without thinking, just to quiet his noisy mind, but it wasn't as if he actually had a question lined up for her. Looking for any suitable topic, he finally landed on something he could use.

"Why are you always after the same books as me?"

It was a strange phenomenon that just kept occurring.

Ilius never hated the library showdowns and blunt exchanges he shared with Laetitia. For that reason, he never thought about it more than necessary, but he was coming to realize that even for a coincidence, this was becoming extreme.

"Oh, you haven't figured that out yet?"

"What, do you have an idea?"

"It's because of Prince Fritz."

"...His Highness?"

"He asked you to do his literature essay, and that's why you were looking for that ancient literature reference book, right, Ilius?"

"Yes..."

It was an open secret that Fritz was always off-loading his homework onto others. There was no reason for Laetitia, his fiancée, not to know that either.

"I wanted to be of help to him as well. You know how he struggles with literature, right? I thought I should double-check the information in that book

to help him make progress on his homework...”

“...Sounds like a real nuisance for him.”

“...I know that.”

Laetitia smiled bitterly.

The pained expression on her face was the result of her deep feelings for Fritz. For some reason, that irritated Ilius.

His Highness has no interest in studying in the first place.

Of course his fiancée was worried—Fritz’s grades at the academy were incredibly poor. That appeared to be why she was always visiting the library, looking for books that could be of help for Fritz’s assignments. Along the way, Ilius and Laetitia continuously found themselves after those exact same books.

“...Put in all the effort you want, but it’s not going to help. His Highness only wants someone who will do his homework for him, not someone to actually teach him anything.”

“...You’re probably right. But what if he changes his mind along the way? Besides, rereading information like this also helps me with my own studies, so it’s not a waste in the end.”

“...That’s a good way to look at it,” murmured Ilius, turning his face away from her.

Just because she’s his fiancée doesn’t mean she needs to worry about him that much.

By neglecting his assignments, Fritz was missing out on valuable knowledge he needed to have as a member of the royal family.

Even Ilius had some initial success with getting Fritz to study, but now, he’d all but abandoned his academic responsibilities completely. Ilius was left with only one method to cozy up to the prince—taking on all his school assignments.

The prince was a true fool, which made it all the easier for Ilius to manipulate him.

For Ilius, that was the only side of Fritz he needed to know... But Laetitia still

saw the prince as someone she wanted to help.

It's not like Laetitia has all the free time in the world either...

She'd worked hard in life, and it showed. The refined manner in which she conducted herself, the grades that put her at the top of their class—none of these were handed to her on a silver platter.

Even outside her academic education and the training she received as a noblewoman, Laetitia was undertaking all sorts of preparations to become the future queen.

She's working her fingers to the bone, while His Highness is just...

Fritz didn't deserve Laetitia as his fiancée.

Being with him was nothing more than a waste of her kindness and time.

There simply *must* be a man more worthy of being Laetitia's future husband out there.

That thought, along with some slightly more tender emotions that came with it, began to take root in Ilius's heart.

I'll force Sumia and His Highness closer together, until she takes the position of Prince Fritz's fiancée away from Laetitia.

A few days later, when his father laid out the next steps in their family's plot, Ilius joined in with an idea or two of his own.

Side Story 2

The New Pup

WHAT would you do if you were reborn?

It's a silly little question.

I remembered discussing this topic with friends in my past life. Of course, I never really gave it much thought—it was just a fun topic for conversation.

I didn't even remember my answer anymore.

"...But now, this is definitely what I want."

I stared at the row of dishes in front of me, murmuring under my breath.

On the day I regained my past-life memories, a single wish took shape in my heart. It was something I thought would prove impossible, but now, in this moment, it had come true.

"What's the matter, Your Majesty...?"

Oops. That was close.

I'd just suddenly frozen in place.

I smiled at Gilbert to distract from his question and picked up a spoon. It was time for the first bite. Dipping into my bowl, I dug out a scoop of light-pink ice cream.

Strawberry ice cream.

The treat was cold and smooth on my tongue, and as it started to melt, I could make out the sour-sweet taste of the berries. It was the same flavor I remembered from my past life. I felt myself break into a smile.

"This is delicious...! It's like I'm eating strawberry snow!!"

"Hehe. I'm glad you like it."

My heart was leaping for joy just like Gilbert's was. His eyes lit up.

I don't mean to exaggerate, but this strawberry ice cream was my dearest wish.

Since I died in my past life while walking my dog, Jiro, I never got a chance to eat my homemade strawberry ice cream that day. That fact was a bitter regret of mine, as a lover of food.

Of course, I was plenty curious about everyone I left behind—Jiro, my family and friends, and even my work—but all I could do was accept that there was no going back to see them again.

I pushed away my sadness with that explanation and instead focused on something I actually *was* capable of doing in this world—creating strawberry ice cream.

The one thing I wanted more than anything after being reborn is to eat strawberry ice cream.

Sure, I'm a bit of a glutton, but I can't tell a lie when it comes to my appetite.

I'd been busy as of late with the chiffon cake preparations for His Majesty's birthday, but the weather was a bit warmer today, so I decided ice cream would be a nice treat for the kitchen staff.

With the help of Gilbert and his extensive cooking knowledge, our venture was a success.

"Thank you, Gilbert. You've helped grant a wish of mine."

"Your Majesty...?"

Gilbert stared at me, spoon in hand and confusion on his face.

Well, that makes sense.

I couldn't tell him about my past life, but I still wanted to share my appreciation.

"Your Majesty, you wanted this ice cream that badly...?"

"I certainly did, and it was delicious. I never thought I'd be able to eat it, so I guess I froze up with emotions for a moment there."

"...Yes, I see how this ice cream could send one into fits of delight."

Gilbert gave a deep nod. It seemed he was taken with his first taste of the sweet ice cream.

“Are you sure you don’t mind us chefs taking the rest of it?”

“Of course not. It was supposed to be a present for all of you in the first place. I’d be honored for you to eat it. Although...” I paused to look around the room. “I guess Berry’s not here today. I’d like you to leave some ice cream to offer her too.”

“Of course. That Gardener Cat is our strawberry ice cream patron, after all... Or should I say, *paw*-tron.”

The two of us smiled. Our minds were filled with images of the tiny little Berry.

It was Berry, the Gardener Cat, who gifted us with these strawberries in the first place. They weren’t widely available, both within Wolfvarte and Elltoria, so at first, I thought strawberry ice cream would remain a distant dream.

But thanks to Berry, we could now stuff our mouths with homemade strawberry ice cream of our own. I wanted her to try it too, as a token of my appreciation, but she didn’t seem to be around today.

“That’s strange. She can usually tell when we’re making something with strawberries.”

“Is she somewhere in the house?”

Maybe she’s going on one of her little patrols? Or she might be out in the forest, keeping an eye on her hidden strawberry patch, watching the berries grow bigger for another day.

“Gilbert, may I borrow a basket? I’m going to bring the ice cream to Berry.”



I quickly found Berry out on her rounds.

She was returning from the direction of the strawberry patch, her tail bouncing with each step. Lucian opened the basket in front of her. Immediately, Berry dashed more than fifty feet to close the distance, perhaps catching a whiff of strawberries. She didn’t hesitate to make use of all four of her legs this time.

“You’re so fast...!”

“Mrow mrow? Meow meow meeeooow?”

Berry did laps around Lucian and me, pressing us for more information.

...So cute.

She stared up at the basket and twitched her little nose.

“Are strawberries like catnip to you, Berry?” I asked.

Her green eyes were pointed straight at me.

“Catnip? I don’t care about whatever that is. I want strawberries! Strawberries!!”

Was that what she just said to me?

I took out the plate of strawberry ice cream, and Berry was already standing on her hind legs. She couldn’t wait.

I set the plate on top of the basket lid and handed Berry her tiny silver spoon.

“Here. Eat up.”

“Mrah!!”

Berry let out a cry, perhaps one of thanks, and dug her spoon straight into the ice cream. She brought the scoop up to her mouth.

“Hraah?!”

Berry’s whiskers perked straight up. Her tail puffed up, and she was frozen in shock.

Does she not like cold things?

I watched her with concern, until the cat finally unfroze and sprung back into motion.

“She takes a bite, stares at the spoon, then goes in for another bite...over and over again.” Lucian seemed amused as he observed this pattern.

“‘When I put the spoon in my mouth, the ice cream just melts into a puddle all on its own. I’m not even chewing it, but I can taste the strawberries. How strange.’ Or something like that?” I added my own dubbing of Berry’s thoughts.

The way she looked so entranced by the ice cream on her spoon was amusing.

“Lucian, how about we have our dessert out here?”

“Of course. Please have a seat.”

I sat down atop the blanket Lucian had spread on the ground.

Along with the ice cream, I had used some strawberry jam in a cookie recipe. Since it was nice and sunny out today, I was in the mood for a little picnic.

I watched Berry, still in a standoff with her spoon, and took my first bite of cookie. It was light and crisp, and as I chewed, I felt the sugary, fragrant sensation grow in my mouth.

Some of the cookies were light pink in color, since we mixed strawberries directly into the dough. Others were baked to a nice brown hue and topped with a dollop of crimson jam and a sprinkling of nuts to give them some texture. Others were shaped into small hearts, stars, and even paw prints, thanks to the new cookie cutters I had transmuted.

The last thing in my basket was a cherry pie the chefs made for me one day earlier. When I bit into a slice, I tasted the sweet, juicy cherries hiding beneath a layer of flaky crust.

“Yum, what a treat! It’s truly the perfect day for a picnic.”

Strawberries and cherries—I could never get enough of any treat that used these sweet, seasonal fruits.

Smacking my lips in satisfaction, I saw that Berry had finished her ice cream and was now eyeing my cookies.

“Would you like a cookie too, Berry?”

She nodded and stretched her front paws out toward me. I placed a brown paw-print-shaped cookie on top of her smooth, black paw pads.

Berry clutched the cookie between her two paws and began to nibble at it. I could hear the tiny crunches as she ate. She finished her snack in an instant. Next, I handed her one of the stained-glass cookies.

“Mrah...?”

Confused, she held her cookie up toward the sun and gazed at it.

The stained-glass cookies are crafted with an opening in the middle and filled with colored candy. When baked, the candy loses its color and becomes transparent, resulting in a beautiful panel that resembles stained glass.

Berry had one of the cookies with a candy panel made with strawberry jam. The sunlight poured in through that layer, casting a red glow on her fur.

“Don’t worry, Berry. It looks like glass, but you can eat it.”

I took another cookie and bit into it so that she could see for herself. With a look of relief, the cat sniffed at the cookie and took her first bite.

“Meow meow meow!!” Berry cried happily.

To my delight, she seemed pleased with the taste of the stained-glass cookies.



BERRY and I—and sometimes even Lucian—continued to help ourselves to one cookie after the next. It was a relaxing, peaceful way of spending our afternoon, until suddenly, Berry stood straight up on her hind legs.

“What’s wrong? ...Oh, it’s Lord Aroo.”

I offered him a greeting when I saw the wolf emerge from the bushes.

“I’ve decided to visit you again. You better appreciate it.”

Lord Aroo gave a brief nod back at me. He was as proud as ever today.

The wolf’s silver fur rustled in the wind as he made his way toward me. Seeing this, Berry froze in place again, just like when she first tried the ice cream.

“Berry, is this your first time meeting Lord Aroo? Don’t be scared. He’s not a bad wolf.”

As I tried to comfort the cat, to my surprise, Berry began to rub her body against my hand.

Her fur was fluffy and it felt very nice as it tickled my skin. I knew Berry was scared, so I felt a little guilty, but really, I was just happy to see she trusted me.

“Graaah... Aroooooo!”

“There’s no need to be afraid. You got here first, so rest at ease,” Lord Aroo

seemed to be saying.

Berry climbed into my lap. Her ears twitched as she stared at Lord Aroo, alert. The cat was clutching her strawberry stained-glass cookie in her striped paws, desperate to keep it away from the new visitor.

“You really don’t have to worry. I’m not going to steal your cookie...”

Lord Aroo seemed a bit exasperated in his breathing.

He lay down and kept his chin to the ground as if to make himself appear less threatening. This seemed to provide some relief to Berry. She left my lap, still holding the cookie with her right paw, and slowly but surely, she made her way toward Lord Aroo.

Creeeep. Creeeep. Creeeep.

Forward and back, she crept close to Lord Aroo, only to step back again, just out of reach. The wolf seemed a bit annoyed, but allowed Berry to continue her little dance undisturbed.

“Lord Aroo is kind to both humans and animals...”

Not that he would actually let me pet him yet.

But he really did have a soft spot when it came to creatures like Berry and the other wolves.

“Well, of course. Those are beasts. It would be childish to reject a beast.”

That’s what I took from Lord Aroo’s little snort.



BERRY and her new pal Lord Aroo left a while after that.

Lord Aroo was truly a mysterious creature—I could never predict when he would appear or when he would be gone again.

According to Melvin, who had known Lord Aroo for some time, that behavior never caused any trouble, so I decided to just accept it for what it was.

After changing out of the dress now covered in Berry’s fur, I decided to head down to the kitchen. I’d received news that the herbs I requested were finally here.

“Herb-crusted chicken. We haven’t had this in a while.”

From behind me, Lucian kept his usual, formal smile, but I could see a bit of joy in that look as well.

The herb-crusted chicken we were about to make came from Elltoria—the homeland I spent seventeen years in.

But it was not the type of fine cuisine enjoyed by nobles. This was a simple recipe passed down through generations all throughout Elltoria.

“It takes me back. When Claude and I went out on the town, we would eat herb-crusted chicken together.”

Claude is the youngest of my three older brothers. He always doted on me, and we spent a lot of time together as kids. He loved to read, and in general, he lived a more leisurely life than I did—including taking frequent trips into town.

Whenever Claude took me out, what I looked forward to the most was eating the simpler meals I could find only there.

“.....”

The duke’s daughter who sneaks into town in search of commoner food... Maybe my past life really was influencing me over all these years. To what extent, I didn’t know, but we really were starting to feel like the same person.

“What’s wrong, Your Majesty?”

“...I’m just trying to remember the recipe correctly.”

Brushing off Lucian’s question, I turned my eyes to the ingredients laid out on the counter.

Chicken thighs and salt, with basil, rosemary, and karana for herbs.

Karana is a common herb in my homeland, famous for the spicy kick it gives to food. It’s cheap and easy to obtain, so it’s often used with simpler meals in our local cuisine.

This herb didn’t exist in Japan, but I had my chefs back at home, whom I’d grown closer to, teach me how to use it. Today’s dish would be a result of their gracious assistance.

First, I cut the chicken thighs in half, then used a fork to poke holes in the meat. This would result in a more consistent cook over a flame.

I sprinkled salt onto the surface of the chicken, then followed it up with the finely chopped rosemary, basil, and karana. The spicy karana would give the chicken a balanced flavor without using black pepper...or so I hoped.

I silently prayed for the chicken to turn out well as I placed it skin-side down in the oil-filled frying pan. Once the meat got nice and brown, I'd flip the thighs over, cover it with a lid, and let it steam until it was ready to eat.

"I see. So this is the local cuisine in Elltoria."

Gilbert had been watching me cook. He gave the plate with the herb-crusted chicken a nod of approval.

It was an ordinary dish, but it was only meant for Lucian and me to enjoy in the first place. Gilbert, in his endless culinary curiosity, came to join us after the fact.

The plate was garnished with red and yellow vegetables that resembled bell peppers. They gave the dish some needed color.

I also cut the chicken into slices so it would be easier to eat, and watched as the tender meat came into view underneath the outer crust. With my first bite, the fragrance of the herbs filled my nose, and as I chewed, I tasted the delicious juices from the chicken. The meat itself was soft and moist, with a refreshing aftertaste.

"The rosemary and basil make for a fragrant bite, while the karana adds a bit of spice as an accent. It's diverse enough to eat many times without growing bored of it."

Gilbert was lost in thought as he stared at the dish. He appeared very focused on analyzing the flavor makeup.

No one from this kingdom was familiar with seasoning like this, but its simplicity might just make it that much more acceptable for foreigners. Food was different no matter where you went in the world, but deliciousness still translated all the same between countries when it came to some flavors.

I already had my hands full with re-creating Earth recipes and familiarizing myself with this world's utensils, but someday, I hoped I could learn Wolfvartian cuisine as well.



AS I busied myself with improving the chiffon cake for His Majesty's birthday, I also worked on learning brand new recipes.

Each day that passed was peaceful and uneventful.

Berry had even come to learn that Lord Aroo wasn't a foe. The two were interacting much more casually now. Lord Aroo also didn't seem to mind when Berry approached him either.

"Thanks to him, Berry's getting along with the other wolves too..."

I thought back on the series of events that led up to this.

Lord Aroo was a large and beautiful wolf whom the others seemed to acknowledge as their superior.

Though he usually moved separately from the rest of the pack, they seemed to revere Lord Aroo as the lone wolf that he was. Now that Berry had earned his affection, the rest of the pack came to accept her too.

"And now, thanks to that..."

Behold: Berry, the wolf-rider of legend.

As the wolves scampered around the villa's front yard, Berry would cling to their backs and ride like the wind.

She seemed to enjoy the speed they could give her, so the cat took many a ride on the wolves' backs. I'd seen it more than once lately. The wolves didn't appear to hate her extra weight either, and so they would run around the yard, clearly having an absolute blast.

"I wonder if I'll get to see it again today...?"

I couldn't believe my eyes the first time I witnessed it. I had to do a double-take at the sight of the glorious wolf-rider.

I stepped outside, eager to see it again, and after some time, the bushes

began to rustle.

It was Lord Aroo, looking the same as ever, along with...

“What...? A baby...?”

Lord Aroo was carrying a wolf pup by the scruff of its neck. It was flapping its short little limbs in the air and crying loudly.

“Lord Aroo? You’re a father? When did this happen...?”

“Gruuuuh?!”

With the pup still in his mouth, Lord Aroo attempted to let out a growl. It sounded like...

“Don’t be ridiculous! A father? Me? Are you joking?”

Or something in that vein of scorn.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry. Where did that pup come from...?”

I crouched down to look the flailing creature in the eye.

Her entire body was already covered in a fluffy coat. Her fur was much thinner and softer than an adult wolf’s, and her ears flopped around atop her head.

“Ruff?”

She looked back at me, and from the pup’s mouth came a little bark. She blinked her big eyes and cocked her head to one side.

“How adorable...!!”

The sight nearly knocked me off my feet. I couldn’t help breaking into a big grin.

Big adult wolves were cute to me too, but their coolness was nothing like the charm this pup possessed.

I continued to stare at the little pup as she let out more cries.

“This woman just fawns over any creature with fur, doesn’t she...?”

Somehow, it felt like Lord Aroo was watching me with a bit of disgust.

“Whoa! Your Majesty!”

“Edgar?”

He raced through the lawn in my direction, yelling loudly for my attention. Edgar didn't appear to have his usual wolves with him. He looked panicked, actually.

“You scared me, Tera! How did such a little pup get all the way over here?!”

“...This pup escaped?”

“She sure did. I was so worried! I had to put the wolves in their pens and go looking with the other wolfkeepers.”

“Then Lord Aroo saved the day, didn't he?” I praised him.

Lord Aroo raised his head, as if offering Tera, the wolf pup, for Edgar to retrieve.

“I heard the wolfkeeper was out in search of this pup. I've got a fine nose, so luckily, I was able to find her,” he seemed to boast, like a boss who had to lend a helping hand to his subordinates at work.

“Thank you so much, Lord Aroo. Tera likes to make her escape, so we wolfkeepers were keeping an eye on her, but she's small enough that we can't seem to keep her in her cage for very long.”

“So she's a repeat offender, then? I wonder why such a little pup wants to escape so badly.”

“...She doesn't like her food.” Edgar turned his head down to look at Tera. His dog ears and tail seemed to droop. “Tera's mother struggled in childbirth, and she ended up passing away about twenty days ago. We've been giving Tera milk to drink, but...”

“She just won't accept it...”

Edgar nodded weakly in response.

It appeared that wolves weren't so receptive to artificial attempts at nursing.

“Her father and the other wolves are looking after her... But sadly, none of the female wolves have any milk to spare right now, so it's up to us to make sure

she's fed."

"What a difficult situation. How old is Tera now?"

"She's about forty days old, so still quite young, but her development is pretty slow, since she won't drink much milk. I just don't know what to do about it."

"I see..."

It wasn't a simple problem.

I took another look at Tera and saw that she did seem quite thin and weak, even for a baby. It sounded like she was drinking just enough milk not to starve, but at this rate, she might be prone to other risks in the future.

"So, are humans giving her the milk directly?"

"No, she doesn't seem to like it that way, so we put the milk in a leather bag, cover it with tightly wound cloth, and make a hole for a tap. Then we leave it out for her to suckle the milk from."

"...So she has to decide when she wants to drink."

Tera, from Lord Aroo's mouth, was staring at me without any fear. Being raised by wolfkeepers seemed to result in a lack of caution around humans.

"I'm sure it's hard on her without a mother..."

Animals are defenseless when they eat.

Tera, the young pup, didn't seem to feel completely safe when it was time to be fed, so it just didn't feel natural to her.

Is there any way she can eat without feeling scared?

I racked my past-life memories for an idea until I landed on something.

"Edgar, would you mind if I participated in Tera's feeding, just once?"



"TERA, it's time to eat."

The pup's ears perked up when she heard her name. Her usual keeper was calling her. When she stood up to follow that voice, her legs wavered a little.

"Hrm..."

Her limbs were heavy, but her belly was too empty.

The pup's natural instincts were telling her she needed to put food into that tiny body. The urge made her take step after wobbly step forward, toward where the wolfkeeper would have milk ready for her.

Though the feeling was a hazy one, Tera did have some appreciation for the fact that she even had the opportunity to eat. But still, this didn't make her actually want to drink the milk.

The milk was warm, but the leather pouch was cold.

The more Tera drank from the lifeless leather vessel, the closer she felt to losing the memories of drinking milk from her mother, and so, she always gave up halfway through her meals.

If her desire for food was instinct, so was the longing she felt for her mother.

With these feelings of loneliness, she carried herself to the milk just to survive another day.

"Ruff...?"

Tera cocked her head slightly when she saw a different meal setup than usual.

There was the leather bag that smelled of milk, but wrapped around it was some kind of cloth lump.

Curiously, she sniffed at the cloth and caught a familiar scent.

It's Mom.

She smelled her mother, the wolf who had disappeared without a trace, on this lump of cloth.

The nostalgic smell drew her in, closer and closer.

She took another look and saw that the lump even had four leglike things sticking out of it and some sort of triangle shapes on the top, like ears. The brown fabric was also a familiar color.

With both a scent and appearance that reminded her of her lost mother, Tera nuzzled her body up against the fabric.

Strangely, the cloth even felt warm to her.

Tera softly closed her eyes, now enveloped by happy memories.

The sweet aroma of milk tickled her nose.

Remembering the days she spent in her mother's embrace, Tera found the hole in the milk bag and began to suckle.



"...AND that's how we managed to get Tera to drink milk."

I finished telling Lord Aroo my story while holding the wolf-shaped plushie. The doll wasn't too big in size. It could sit in my hands when I put them together.

I had thought back to my plushie-making experience from my past life, then started with a small toy, working my way up to the experimental wolf plushie meant for Tera.

"You never know what experiences are going to help you out in life..."

Back in college, at my friend's request, I helped her make stuffed toys for her volunteer work when the group didn't have enough items to sell at the school festival.

Wanting to make realistic Shiba Inu dolls, I'd put time into finding the right pattern paper and learning how to use it. Now, that experience had proved useful again.

Shiba Inus and wolves share some similarities in their ears and faces. But their torsos, tails, and other small details are different shapes, so I had to adjust my work as I stitched together a mother wolf doll for Tera.

"I made her a plush toy to act as her mother and set it next to the bag of milk. I wasn't sure it would work, but I'm so relieved she took to it."

When I lived in Japan, I saw a documentary showing how dolls could help animals in their nursing.

The wolves who visited my villa were very smart. The depth of their intelligence and emotions was probably why Tera struggled so much with her loss of a parent.

“But still, the wolfkeepers and I can’t replace her mother...”

Maybe all we could do was offer her the occasional memory of the mother wolf.

The plushie had another trick to it too. I’d stuffed some of the mother’s remaining fur, along with fabric that had her scent on it, inside the doll. Finally, I filled the plushie with a bag of hot water to give it a familiar sense of warmth.

It was all a lot of guesswork, but it appeared to have been a success.

“Ruff!!”

“Welcome, Tera. We’ve been waiting for you.”

The pup wagged her tail vigorously as she approached the yard with Edgar and the others.

“Arf Arf!! Bark bark bark!!”

Tera bounced her way around me.

She was a completely different wolf now, only six days after first using the stuffed animal.

Her legs were thick and her body was plump. The change in demeanor made her almost unrecognizable, now that she was growing.

Tera sprang at me like a rubber ball, landing straight in my arms.

“Hey, that tickles!”

Her little red tongue licked at my cheeks.

Now that Tera was eating, she’d become much friendlier with me too.

It probably had something to do with my lingering scent on the wolf plushie I stitched together for her. Perhaps she liked how it mixed with that of her mother.

Lord Aroo’s blue-green eyes watched me return Tera’s affection with a good petting.

“What’s wrong? Do you want me to pet you too, Lord Aroo?”

“Uruuh!!”

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm just glad to see Tera doing better, that's all," his annoyed grunt seemed to say.

He turned away from me with a pout, though I could still see his tail swinging from side to side.

He seemed just as happy to see Tera full of energy.

"You're so nice, Lord Aroo. So nice, in fact, that I'd like to give you something."

Lucian handed me a plushie that I set down in front of the wolf.

"I modeled this one after you."

The base model was exactly the same as the one I used for Tera's mother.

But for this one, I built it with silver fabric that looked just like Lord Aroo's coat, and I even painted some wood to make a pair of blue-green eyes for the face. I was having so much fun making plushies, I just couldn't resist.

"Aroo...?"

"Why are you giving this to me?" he asked with a cock of his head as he poked the doll with his nose.

"You don't sleep near the rest of the pack, do you? I bet you get cold in the winter. If you have someone put a small hot-water bottle inside this doll, it'll be nice and warm to sleep with."

"Grrruh!!"

"I don't need a hot-water bottle!" he declared, pushing the doll over with his snout.

Hmm. I guess he doesn't like it.

I was a bit sad, but I decided to take the plushie for myself.

"Very well, then I'll keep this in *my* bed with a hot-water bottle during the winter."

I gently pet the doll's head with my hand, taking a moment to admire my nice handiwork. The doll had the same proud look to it that Lord Aroo did.

Just when I decided I'd keep it on a shelf in my room until winter arrived...

"Woof!!"

"I changed my mind. Gimme that thing."

Lord Aroo snatched the plushie back.

"Does that mean you like it, Lord Aroo?"

Naturally, my question didn't receive any answer.

With the Lord Aroo plushie in his mouth, Lord Aroo dashed off into the forest, out of sight.

"I wonder what changed his mind...?"

As I cocked my head in confusion, Tera came up to me to play some more, as if to fill the space that Lord Aroo left.

I spent some time entertaining the inexhaustible Tera, until it was nearing time for the wolves to leave.

"Your Majesty! The strawberry ice cream is almost ready!"

"Thank you. I'll be there soon."

Hearing Gilbert call to me from the villa, I took Tera off my lap and stood up.

The pup started to sulk, knowing it was time to say goodbye, so I bent down to pet her head.

"I'll see you again tomorrow, okay? But now it's time for both of us to go home."

"Arf..."

She stared up at me with her sad puppy-dog eyes. I wanted nothing more than to give in, but I couldn't let her grow up spoiled.

Reluctantly, I turned to head toward the dining room. Strawberry ice cream, made by Gilbert and the other chefs, was waiting for me.

Once I was inside, I found Berry waiting for my arrival, holding her little spoon in hand. She had sensed the strawberries in the air.

"You're such a glutton, aren't you, Berry?"

In that way, she was a lot like me, her master (or whatever our relationship was).

I wondered which of us would win in a battle of strawberry enthusiasm.

What would you do if you were reborn?

By eating strawberry ice cream, I'd already found my answer to that question.

I gained a villa where I could cook, received help from Gilbert and the other chefs, and was led to strawberries by Berry herself.

My life as the figurehead queen, surrounded by uncountable blessings and the company of my many furry friends, would continue on unchanged.



“THAT damn woman. I just never know what she's going to do next...”

Glenreed was leaning back in the velvety chair of his office.

On top of his large oak desk, looking completely out of place among all the refined furnishings that filled his room, sat a cute little wolf plushie.

“I ended up bringing it back home with me...”

The plushie stood out like a sore thumb in this room. It just looked unnatural, sitting there in front of Glenreed's cold yet beautiful face.

...And he never even meant to accept the thing in the first place.

He was going to return it to Laetitia, its creator, and that would be the end of it.

But no, I had to take it with me. She said she was going to keep this thing in her bed...

Sure, it was only modeled after Glenreed's silver wolf form, but then he heard Laetitia say she wanted to sleep with it. Naturally, he had to prevent that at all costs, so he ended up rushing home with the plushie in his mouth.

“.....”

When he thought back to how happy Laetitia looked as she carried that plushie, Glenreed couldn't bring himself to throw it away. She probably

wouldn't find out either way, but for some reason, the idea of tossing it out bothered him.

"Fine, then..."

He picked the wolf plushie up and set it in a corner of his bookshelf.

The stuffed silver wolf found its new home between political documents and records of war.

If Melvin ever saw this toy, he'd probably never let me hear the end of it...

But again, he pictured Laetitia's happy face as she held the plushie out to him.

This is the only solution, Glenreed convinced himself once more, then turned to begin the paperwork on his desk.

Afterword

HELLO again, or if we haven't met before, it's very nice to meet you.

I'm Yu Sakurai, the author of this book.

I want to thank you for reading *Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnating, I Will Cook with My Fluffy Friends: The Figurehead Queen Is Strongest at Her Own Pace*.

This is the novelization of the work I first published through Shōsetsuka ni Narō.

For this adaptation, I polished up the original story to flow more smoothly, added multiple new scenes, and wrote two new bonus chapters as well, all to make it easier to read in book form.

These new side stories include a prequel about Glasses Creep (a.k.a. Ilius) and Laetitia, and another chapter where Laetitia plays with Lord Aroo and a wolf pup. It also contains Berry and Lord Aroo's first meeting, which I hope you will find amusing.

There are many things I'd like to mention in regards to the story, but above all else, one of the biggest attractions of this version is the beautiful artwork drawn by the wonderful Kasumi Nagi.

From Laetitia's gorgeous, flowing gown to Berry's big smile on the cover. Glenreed also looks very handsome in color, not to mention that detailed, gallant, and dreamy outfit...

Each and every illustration surpassed my wildest expectations as the author. Even the black-and-white pictures of the various animals made them look so perfectly fluffy, I wanted to pet them myself. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Kasumi Nagi for her work.

This series was blessed with such beautiful artwork, and even more incredibly, the story is also set to receive a manga version in Japan.

The manga will be illustrated by the artist Monitsunanoni and published

through Futabasha's website Monster. Monitsunanoni's art makes all the characters look so alive and expressive, and their unique designs are adorable as well. There are also illustrations of Ilius, Sumia, and even Jiro the Shiba Inu, none of whom appear in the novel's art.

Also, I will be releasing another novel set in the same world as this story, to be published by Ichijinsha's Iris Neo label.

The title is *My Little Sister Stole My Fiancé, and Then the Beast Prince Proposed to Me*, and it's set to be published on February 4, 2020. It's a story of two characters—a hero who can transform into a lion and a pessimistic countess—so I'd love it if you give that tale a read as well.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge the people who helped me reach this point: All the readers who supported me on Shōsetsuka ni Narō. My editor, proofreader, and everyone from the printing company who gave me lots of advice about my work. Kasumi Nagi and Monitsunanoni, who provided me with illustrations.

Truly, I can't thank you all enough. I'll keep working to live up to your expectations as an author, so I hope you'll come along for the ride.

Author Bio:

Born in Aichi Prefecture. Lover of furry critters. I love all animals but adore dogs, cats, and penguins in particular. My current dream is to win the lottery and build a penguin aquarium in my house with an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

December 2019



cross infinite world



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I REJECT THESE
HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!**

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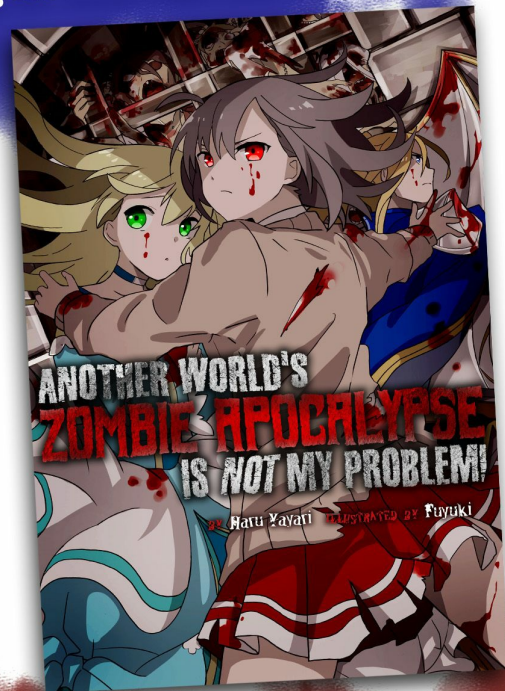
"I don't care if you are a man, let me court you."

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